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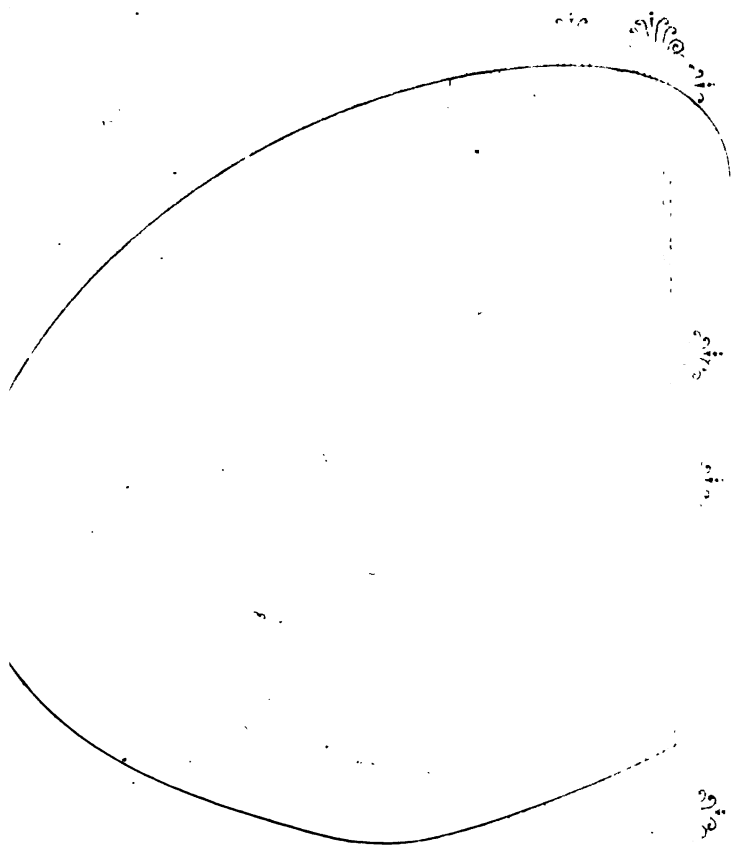
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**MY BROTHER BASIL.**



V BROTHER BASIL.—Page 164.

# MY BROTHER BASIL

BY

E. NEAL

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By JESSIE PATRICK FINDLAY.

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**AN OLD CHRONICLE OF LEIGHTON.**

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**MY BROTHER BASIL.**

By E. NEAL.

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**MRS ROMAINÉ'S HOUSEHOLD.**

By EVELYN EVERETT-GREEN.

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# MY BROTHER BASIL.



## CHAPTER I.

### MISTAKEN.

"No age was spared, nor sex, nay, no degree ;  
Nor infants in the porch of life were free."—*Johnson*.

**I** MAY as well say at once that I am not my own heroine. I have no qualifications for the part. My hair is neither red nor frizzy ; my eyes are not green ; I am not cataleptic ; nor have I any but the most vague and general ideas on the subject of occult influence or odic force. On the other hand, I am not exceptionally beautiful, or talented, or anything that a heroine of the other school ought to be.

Since that one tragic night, without which this story would never have been written, my life has been free from great events. It has been my lot to watch the dramas of other lives rather than to tread the stage myself. My *métier* has been spectator, not actor ; and on the whole, I am content that it should have been so. If my life has not been

exciting, it has been happy, as nations and lives are said to be who have no history. It is the history of other lives that I have to tell—lives fuller and more eventful than mine, more exciting, but less serene and calm. Even on that strange and tragic night of which I spoke just now, I was scarcely an actor, or only in the most passive and involuntary sense, but the scenes of which I was the unnoticed observer burnt themselves into my memory in ineffaceable lines.

My father was a young man then, a captain in the Honourable East India Company's service, and stationed with his regiment at Sooltapoor. There were three children, of whom I was the eldest, my sister Nelly, who could not speak plain, and a baby boy of two or three months. I ought to have gone home before this, but Sooltapoor was so far from the coast that travelling was difficult, and while my parents were trying to make arrangements for me, the mutiny broke out, and the opportunity slipped by. So I stayed, growing daily whiter and thinner, as English children do who remain too long in India, and feeling the intense heat of the Indian summer more than either my parents or the little ones: feeling it, no doubt, all the more for a certain restraint that had crept into our lives. We were in the very centre of the disturbed districts, and though my father fondly hoped that his own troops were too loyal to be infected, there was enough in the condition of the country to inspire the gravest uneasiness, and to make him take every possible precaution to ensure our safety. He would fain have sent us all

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them, instead of in the women's room with the other children.

Nelly and I were with our ayah in the general apartment, a room already too small for the numbers who were obliged to share it, and still further overcrowded on that dreadful night by the arrival of some fugitives from a neighbouring cantonment. They came in, weary and footsore, just as the brief Indian twilight was falling, and they were scarcely housed before the darkness of a tropical night was upon us to enhance the confusion. I can see it all now—the bare barrack-room, dimly lit by chiraghs, native lamps, fed by villainous oil, and seeming to combine the maximum of smell with the minimum of light. What a picture it was they showed! crying children, bewildered nurses, weary mothers forgetting their own fatigue in ministering to the necessities of their little ones. The new arrivals belonged to a Queen's regiment, and there were English and Irish nurses squabbling over their respective charges with the dark-skinned ayahs already in possession. There had been no time to bring anything with them in their hurried flight, and, badly as those in the fort were supplied, they could not refuse to lend food and bedding, and even clothing, to the hapless fugitives.

"Sure an' ye could make room for *wan* more, Missie?" I heard a voice saying above me, as I lay on the charpoy I shared with Nelly, and watched the shadowy-looking groups the faint light distorted into grotesqueness. Nelly was already asleep; the dark eyes that were such a curious contrast to her "lint-

white locks " were shut, and I did not like disturbing her, but I could not summon courage to refuse. And, indeed, the woman did not wait for an answer, but laid a sleeping figure beside us, and went away, with a cheerful "Good-night, Missie," to attend to another child. I did not know who she was, but my mother said afterwards she was probably one of the soldiers' wives who had come in that afternoon from Azuffghur. Several of them were Irish, and both speech and face showed that she was an Irish-woman. Beyond this I noticed nothing. I was too sleepy for observation. The room and all its occupants were gradually becoming indistinct, the confusion of tongues was softening to a soothing murmur, and I was soon as fast asleep as Nelly or the little unknown child who lay so quietly beside us. I slept, and knew nothing more till I was awake, as I hope few English children will ever be waked again.

Imagine what it was, ye who "live at home at ease!" A noise as of a hundred cannon, a crash as if the citadel was falling about our ears, and that meant, we afterwards learnt, the exploding of a mine under the principal gate of the fort; the clash and clink of steel, as the suddenly roused men sprang to arms, the sharp rattle of bullets, the sounds of mortal conflict, the shrieks of women and children, the groans of wounded and dying men.

The gate was down, and hundreds of dark figures were pouring in at the breach, while the little handful of defenders could only be counted by tens. It was said afterwards that every white man fought as if he had the courage and the strength of ten; and

what wonder, when they were all that stood between the helpless creatures within and death—or worse? But the contest was too unequal, and already there were lithe dusky forms in the women's room, and reddened swords and piercing cries. I sat up trembling and dazed with horror, but Nelly never stirred. Children of her age sleep so sound, and my little sister was such a bonnie, healthy child. It was too dark to distinguish much, but suddenly I saw my mother coming towards our corner, with a strange wild look and outstretched arms. She dragged, rather than helped me off the charpoy.

“Run!” she cried; “your father is outside. Run to him, Esther, and I will bring Nelly.” I sped along in the direction she pointed, guided by the glimmering of a light in the passage. It was so dark in the room I had just left, for already half the lamps were extinguished in the scuffle and confusion that prevailed, that had not my mother known exactly the position of our charpoy, I doubt if she could have made her way so swiftly to it. Before I reached my father she was with us again, with a sleeping child closely folded in her arms, and that awful look of frenzied horror in her face. As she appeared, my father opened a small postern at the end of the passage, and we found ourselves outside the fort. Luckily there was no moon, and the starlight was not sufficient to betray our flight, even if the mutineers had not been too busy with their fiendish work within the fort to have eyes or thoughts for the fugitives who were stealing along under cover of the night. There were, besides our-

selves, another officer, and his wife and child, and a young English girl who had clung to my father when her brother was cut down before her eyes. Both Captain Damar and my father were wounded, and it was only when they found resistance hopeless that my father determined to escape by the little postern, of which fortunately he had a key. There was no time to find others to share their flight, no time except to rescue wife and child, and fly.

My father had Charlie in one arm, and he caught me up with the other. Even now I seem to feel again the labouring of the heart I was pressed against, and the strange, panting breath.

"We must run for it," he said, "but be brave, dear wife! If they overtake us I have *this*."

He held up something that glittered in the starlight, and we sped along the dusty road, keeping in the shelter of the cactus hedge, and making for a dāk bungalow, at a little distance from the fort, which Captain Damar believed to be deserted.

The Damars got there first, being less encumbered, and when we reached it they had already lit a chiragh that had been left upon the table, and were looking eagerly out for us. We gathered together in the welcome shelter, a panting, breathless group. My father set me down, and I remember still the desolate appearance of the deserted room and the unnatural expression of the familiar faces. My father had a sabre-cut across his forehead, and Miss Wharton took Charlie from him, and began hushing him off to sleep, while my mother was unrolling the shawl from the awakening child in her arms. She set the little

bundle down, and disengaged the folds of the shawl, and then—

Shall I ever forget my own bewilderment or my mother's awful shriek? The child she had saved at the risk of her own life was not Nelly—was not her own child at all. It was the little fair-haired boy who had been laid on the charpoy beside us, and whose very existence I had till that moment forgotten.





## CHAPTER II.

### UNCLE DICK.

“Throw thine eye on yon young boy.”—*Shakespeare.*

**T**HE little boy, so strangely and unwittingly rescued, was a fair, pretty child, apparently about four or five years old, but small and slightly built. He stood staring in bewilderment at the circle of astonished and scarcely friendly faces ; and as it dawned upon him that he was amongst strangers, the corners of the delicate mouth drooped and fell, the sensitive lips trembled, and tears rose in the large blue eyes.

“Who is he?” Mrs Damar cried. “He doesn’t belong to the regiment, I’m sure.”

“He must have been amongst those poor people from Azuffghur,” said my father. “The only one left by now, I’m afraid.”

“Poor little man !” said Mrs Damar, pitifully, as she set her own child down and took him on her knee.

My mother did not speak. She sat rocking herself to and fro in speechless agony, while my father vainly endeavoured to soothe her grief. Alas ! poor

mother, not even he could do that. She was like one distraught, accusing herself of having killed her child, and covering her eyes as if she could not bear the sight of the child who had lain in Nelly's place, and whose long fair curls had made it possible to mistake him for her. She was only quieted when Mrs Damar carried him into another room, and then she fell into a sort of stupor from which only my father could rouse her.

When we left the bungalow I believe she would have left the poor little boy behind, but for my father's stern refusal to permit it.

"Do you think there is a chance in such things?" he exclaimed. "Surely the child is given to us as much as our own. Think what you would wish if some other woman had found Nelly."

It was the most effectual argument he could have used. For the first time since her loss, my mother burst into tears, weeping with a passionate violence that frightened Charlie and me, and made little Basil tremble like an aspen-leaf, but that probably saved her reason or her life. And when the storm had spent itself, she went up to the astonished child and kissed his brow.

"For Nelly's sake," she said, and let my father lead her quietly away.

And so Basil became my brother then and for evermore.

His name, he said, was Basil Ford—or so my father understood it, for the child said it all together, as if it were one word. He did not speak very plainly, running his words together in a hurried,

nervous way, that my father said was probably caused by some mental shock. Who could tell what scenes of horror those blue eyes might have gazed on before he was brought into the citadel at Sooltapoor? They were the bluest eyes I ever saw, the sort of deep sea-blue that seldom outlasts childhood; and that, indeed, in Basil's case, merged into a greyer hue as he grew to man's estate. But though the colour altered, his eyes never lost their look of wonderful clearness and depth, or the power of expression that made their glance sometimes so scathing and sometimes so sweet. Luminous, large-pupilled, clear and true, I have seen many beautiful eyes, but none like my brother Basil's. Even as a child I felt their power, and could refuse nothing to their imperious pleading. And later—

But we were both children that long day that was spent in the deserted bungalow—children with no prevision of the future before us, and a very real sense of the discomforts of the present.

My father had decided that we must not attempt to pursue our flight till nightfall. Though there might be danger in delay, there would certainly have been more danger still in moving abroad within view of the now hostile citadel. As to the fate of those within it, it was only too certain; and, indeed, Captain Damar, who had been round the compound to reconnoitre our position, had heard groups of Sepoys discussing the events of the night as they passed along the road, and declaring that every white person had perished—"man, woman, and child."

It was only what they knew must have happened, but at least it made my mother more willing to leave the place where she had tried to persuade herself that her child might yet be alive.

"She was so little, so innocent—who could harm a baby like that?" she cried, clinging desperately to hope. But her own eyes had shown her the hopelessness of expecting pity for innocence or helplessness from the dark-skinned fanatics who were masters now in Sooltapoor. When the night fell she let my father place her on one of the horses we had found in the stables, and when the rest were mounted, we set forth—a strangely silent party, keeping to the bye-roads, and guiding our course by the stars.

I remember little of the toilsome journey, and, indeed, I believe I slept most of the way, supported by my father's arm, and undisturbed by the alarms and anxieties that pressed upon the elders. That we gained the shelter of Cawnpore before morning, and eventually reached Calcutta in safety, is all that is necessary to relate. Captain Damar had been ordered to join the British troops before Lucknow, but my father's wound did not heal, and it ended in his being invalided home. Mrs Damar and her child were to accompany him, and of course my mother and myself, Charlie, and my brother Basil. I had already begun to call him so; but though he was very engaging and affectionate, he evidently pined for his own people, and only accepted us as unsatisfactory substitutes. He had got over his first shyness, and chattered volubly enough to my

father and me, but though he told us he had a pony named "Jack," and a bearer named "See-See," he could tell my father nothing that served to identify him or give a clue to his parentage. The little nightdress he wore was of coarse material, and bore no mark, and though at first there seemed a possible clue in the fact that he wore a small silver amulet, such as Hindus are fond of binding on their arms, it turned out to be quite an ordinary one, and offered no salient points for recognition. It had been put on his arm by See-See, he said, but he could not tell us more than that. As for his parents, Basil could not even tell us their names. They had been Dada and Mamma to him, and that was all he knew.

"Was that fat woman who put you in our bed your mamma?" I enquired.

"No!" cried Basil, indignantly. "My mamma booful—more boofuller than yours."

I remember disputing this on filial grounds, but Basil stood firm.

"Dada says so," he said, conclusively. "Dada says Mamma more boofuller than any one, and Dada knows best."

Poor little fellow! there was something pathetic in his firm belief in the father whom it was only too probable he no longer possessed.

"Is your dada a soldier, my boy?" said my father, stroking the long fair curls with a tender, pitying touch.

"Dada a tum-tum man," said Basil; and as we stared in not unnatural bewilderment, he condescended to explain by going through a pantomime of

beating an imaginary drum, and blowing an equally imaginary trumpet. My father looked puzzled, and asked other questions, but without eliciting satisfactory replies. Basil was easily frightened, and though he was always more at ease with my father than my mother, the effort to answer seemed to bring back all his shyness and timidity. I knew afterwards that my father came to the conclusion that Basil's father had probably been in a regimental band. It did not seem quite consistent with a bearer and pony of his own, but longer acquaintance showed that Basil possessed a lively imagination, and he was at the age when children "romance" with little perception of the line that separates truth from fiction. Besides this, my father obtained indisputable evidence that a trumpeter named Ford had been in the regiment stationed at Azuffhur, and had perished in the massacre at Sooltapoor.

"But whatever his birth, he is my own dear son now," said my father decidedly, and I believe he felt quite relieved that no one ever appeared to put in a prior claim. Poor Trumpeter Ford lay in the ditch at Sooltapoor, and Basil was to all intents and purposes my father's son.

I have said that no one ever put forward a claim to Basil, but I ought not to omit to record that Basil himself laid claim to kinship with a stranger the very day before we sailed for England. The claim was disallowed, but the incident, with all the attendant circumstances, stamped itself on my childish recollection even more firmly than I knew. Memory is as capricious as dreams, and has apparently as



“‘IS YOUR DADA A SOLDIER, MY BOY?’”—Page 19.



little sense of fitness and proportion. Why should some scenes fade so completely from our remembrance, while others stand out in a vivid presentment quite disproportionate to their actual importance? Is it all chance-medley, or is there some yet unrecognised law? I leave physiologists and psychologists to settle this; but whatever the reason, certain it is that I can see, as if it had happened yesterday, the wide, bright Calcutta street, the tide of vehicles and pedestrians, the imposing front of Government House, and the brilliant groups just then descending the steps. The Governor-General himself was there, followed by several of his suite, and looking as distinguished and commanding as only "the Great Eltchi" could. The setting sun flashed brightly on sword-hilt, and lace, and epaulet, as the staff-officers came down to the row of carriages and horses in waiting, and Basil suddenly slipped his little white hand from the dark long fingers of the ayah who was with us, and darted up to a gentleman in uniform, who appeared to be amongst the Governor's suite.

"Uncle Dick! Uncle — Uncle Dick!" he cried, clinging round the spurred and booted leg in a perfect ecstasy of emotion and delight.

The gentleman thus suddenly assailed was a tall, handsome man, about thirty years of age, with close-cropped hair, and the long fair whiskers that were known as "weepers" then. He started violently, and looked down with an expression of intense and almost horrified surprise. That was all I understood from his glance: neither recognition nor welcome, but a strange horror and incredulous surprise.

"What foolery is this?" he exclaimed, in a harsh, grating voice, looking round at the men clustered near, as he disengaged Basil's clinging hands with no very gentle touch. "What does the child mean? Does no one know who he is?"

The ayah and I had hurried to the spot, but the little scene had attracted general attention, and before she could explain, the Governor-General's curiosity was excited.

"What is it?" he asked, pausing as he was about to get into his carriage, and looking at the officer to whose knees Basil had clung.

"Some mistake, your Excellency," said the gentleman he addressed. "I have no nephew, as you know."

"And don't you know the child?"

"I never saw him in my life before."

My poor Basil! Shall I ever forget the heart-broken look in the small white face?

"Un—cle Dick!" he faltered faintly, and then dropped down senseless at his feet.

I had been too shy and bewildered to utter a word, but now I rushed to him impetuously, and threw my arms round his neck.

"He is my brother, my *dear* brother Basil," I cried; "and you are a nasty, horrid man to make him cry!"

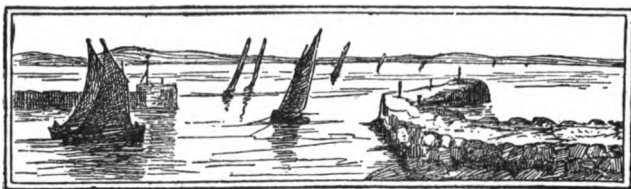
I was crying too much myself to know very clearly what followed, but I heard the ayah explaining, and the explanation seemed to give general satisfaction. It was not our dear old Ayah Wuzeerun—Wuzeerun lay cold and stiff at Sooltapoor—but a new one, whom my mother had engaged for the voyage home, and who did not know that Basil was not the brother I

called him. We were Captain Graham's children, she said now, and the Governor-General seemed quite satisfied, as he had every right to be. He got into his carriage and was driven off, and the officers mounted and jingled after him; the crowd quickly dispersed, and only the ayah and Basil and I were left on the steps of Government House.

Basil had revived a little, but he was shaken and trembling, and the ayah lifted the light little figure in her arms, where he lay with closed eyes, and uttering from time to time a low sobbing sigh.

We got home without further adventure, except that as we left the steps of Government House, a native servant, whom I had seen in attendance on the officer whom Basil had addressed as "Uncle Dick," glided from the shadow of one of the pillars, looked curiously at Basil, as he lay white and sobbing in the ayah's arms, and immediately retired with a perfectly expressionless face. My father considered it an additional proof that Basil had been misled by some resemblance of face or uniform, for the servant would probably have recognised the child had he been his master's nephew.

"But, indeed, if it had been anything but the child's fancy, the uncle would have known him himself," said my father, with unanswerable logic; "and it isn't very likely that Trumpeter Ford would have a brother on the Governor-General's staff."



## CHAPTER III.

### HAZELFORD.

"He is in love with an ideal, a creature of his own imagination, a child of air, and echo of his heart."—*Longfellow.*

**H**AZELFORD is a quiet country town in the south of England, a sleepy little place, that would be almost unknown if it were not that the great castle that frowns down upon it is the seat of the Earls of Otterbourne, famous alike in story and in song. To the ordinary tourist Hazelford simply means Hazelford Castle, and I must admit it is much the same with its own inhabitants. Literally and metaphorically, the castle dominates the little town. It stands on the brow of a sharp escarpment, one of the cleanly-cut chalk ridges that mark the ancient coast-lines, and is built in the form of a quadrangle, with turrets and bastions and towers, and a great Norman keep frowning over all. The cliff itself rises sheer from the low alluvial plain that lies between Hazelford and the sea, and the red roofs of Hazelford seem to nestle at the feet of the huge square pile of solid grey masonry that crowns the beetling crag. It is an article of faith with us all that no other castle is so finely situated, and certainly

I have never seen any other that seemed such a visible embodiment of strength, and force, and power. It may be that its strength is a thing of the past, that the ivy that clings to its buttresses hides a slow but sure decay, and that modern cannon would make very little of its ten-feet walls ; but there is a moral force in the old stronghold still, and no one in Hazelford quite escapes its influence. The castle is the determining factor in their lives ; the Earl is the permanent interest that outlasts wars and tumults, the rise and fall of nations, the change of ministries—everything, in short, except the merits of shorthorns and the price of corn. To us, as a family, it outweighs even these ; for my Uncle Chayter is the Earl's agent, and naturally the Earl's affairs are paramount with him and his.

Uncle Chayter is my mother's brother, and the suavest and demurest of men. He is a little man, with a bald head that shines as if it were French-polished, and a fringe of natty white hair. Natty, indeed, is a word that might have been coined expressly for him—his round little head is so smooth and so shiny, his little white tie is so punctiliously tied, his coat—Uncle Chayter always wears a dress-coat—is so preternaturally free from dust, and his shoes are so trim and neat. His hands are small, and as delicate as a woman's, with long taper fingers and filbert nails, of which I have a suspicion that the dear old man is just a little vain. One finger is adorned with a handsome diamond ring, "a present from the Earl," as Uncle Chayter never fails to inform any stranger whose casual glance happens to rest upon it. I remember his doing so once at a *table-*

*d'hôte* in a fashionable watering-place, and his indignant, incredulous surprise when the stranger calmly rejoined, "What Earl, may I ask?" What Earl! For us in Hazelford there was only one earl in the British peerage, or at least only one worth mentioning. My uncle turned his back on the unconscious offender, and always alluded to him afterwards "as that ignorant person whom we met at the *table-d'hôte*."

I think no one could live at Hazelford without being infected with the prevailing sentiment, but perhaps I shared it less strongly because to me the Earl, with his manifold perfections, was a mere abstraction and a name. I had seen his likeness often—likenesses of the Earl abounded in Hazelford, and literally swarmed about my uncle's house—but the Earl himself had only been once at his ancestral home in the twenty years during which he had borne the title. For twenty years Hazelford had existed without him, incredible as it must have seemed to the loyal little town; and though I did not doubt the genuineness of its interest, I felt that it must be rather a traditional sentiment than any personal feeling towards the present Earl. Perhaps, in its heart of hearts, Hazelford did not consider its lord's absence an unmitigated evil. Uncle Chayter represented him with infinite dignity, and administered the estate with conscientious fidelity; but his instructions were to be liberal to the tenants, and he carried these out faithfully, renewing leases on easy terms, building cottages, draining fields, repairing farm-buildings, and remitting rents—in short, doing everything that is expected from a model landlord in the latter half of the nine-

teenth century as well as if he had been the Earl himself. Better, perhaps—for the Earl was said to be of dilettante tastes, a connoisseur in painting, and an enthusiast in music, but with little knowledge of country matters; whereas Uncle Chayter was a thorough man of business, and knew the acreage of every farm, and the nature of its soil and subsoil, as well as the tenants themselves. He had every one's good word on the estate, and the diamond ring, of which he was so artlessly proud, testified to Lord Otterbourne's appreciation of his agent's services. I knew, with a thrill of affectionate pride, that there was no man more esteemed and respected in the county than my Uncle Chayter. In his private relations he was not less irreproachable. A better brother, a kinder uncle could not be, as we had good reason to know—my mother, and Basil, and Charlie, and I—"My three," as my mother called us to our friends; but sometimes, when we were quite alone, her eyes would take a far-away yearning look, her lips would move faintly, and I knew that she was whispering softly to herself, as I had once heard her say half aloud, "No; my *four*." For though it is twenty years since the taking of Sooltapoor, my mother has not forgotten Nelly.

Still, Time is a great physician, and twenty years is a balsam that salves most wounds. My mother has not ceased to mourn for her dead child, but the tears she sheds as each anniversary of the fatal day returns are beneficent and healing drops, not the devastating storm-flood that tore its way when her grief was fresh and new. She has even learnt to speak of Nelly—not often, or to strangers—but when

we sit together in the summer twilight, or in the "darkling" of a winter's afternoon, she will talk to me of my little sister, and I know that she has learnt to think of her with the gentle and chastened regret with which we all learn in time to mourn our dead. Perhaps the sharp anguish with which she could not but think of the little one so unconsciously abandoned to its fate was a strain too great for long endurance, a pain that numbed by sheer intensity, a fire that burnt itself out perforce. But though that first passionate grief has passed away, I know that Nelly is not forgotten, for in my mother's voice is a tenderness that is only born of sorrow, and in her eyes is the look that mothers wear whose little ones are in heaven, and whose thoughts "continually with them there ascend."

My father also has become a tender memory to us. He was always more or less of an invalid after that fatal night at Sooltapoor, and he died about five years ago, leaving but a slender provision for his widow and children, as those who have served their country in her need are very apt to do.

My mother had her pension to eke out her scanty means, and forty pounds a year for Charlie, who was still under age. I had only enjoyed that magnificent provision for a year, and of course Basil—"my dear adopted son," as my father's will called him, the will which made him share equally with Charlie and me, to our entire content—Basil could claim no pension at all.

He was four-and-twenty now, this dear brother of my heart, for we reckoned that he must have been four years old when my mother bore him in Nelly's

stead from Sooltapoor. The fair, timid child had grown into a strong and stalwart man, broad of chest and lithe of limb, and with no remains of his old delicacy save in the finely cut nostril and too-sensitive mouth. His hair was still fair, and his complexion had the peculiar pallor that is often seen in those whose childhood has been passed under an Indian sun, but as his features were well formed and clearly cut, it gave his face somewhat of a statuesque effect, and was rather an improvement than otherwise. I do not know if other people thought him handsome—to me he was something so much higher and better that the word seems to have all the satire of inadequate praise. One needed to know him, to meet the sunshine of his smile and the clear, frank gaze of his eyes, to understand the charm that lay in both; as one needed to hear the voice, that was of lower pitch than most men's, but with a vibrant quality that made it wonderfully expressive, to understand how straight it went to the heart, how irresistible it was in pleading, how potent in command, how tender—Well, it was tender enough in brotherly affection, and that was—and is—enough for me. Till lately I had fancied it was enough for Basil too. He was of a grave and reserved nature, in spite of the appealing eyes that seemed to invite confidence, and the quick smile that seemed to promise a return; not a man by any means to fall lightly in love, as Charlie did already with every fresh face, and I believed that no boyish fancies had ever stirred his heart. I ought to have remembered that if they had he would probably not have informed me of the fact. If he was not a man to fall lightly in love, he was

certainly not a man to babble of it when he did. I ought to have known, I ought to have understood ; but I did not. I knew all the Hazelford girls so well, and it seemed so impossible that any of them should touch Basil's heart. I had weighed them all in the balance and found them wanting, and pretty May Fielding was the lightest weight of all. Of course I knew that Basil thought her pretty—who could see her and not do that? I knew that he liked her “in a way”—what male creature in Hazelford did not do the same? But for anything serious between them, I never even dreamt of it; and it was only when Basil came and claimed my congratulations that I knew how blind I had been.

Fortunately he was blind, too—blind to the blank surprise that must have been in my face, blind to the disappointment I could hardly keep out of my voice. That it should be May, pretty, empty-headed May, who was to take my brother from me! I could have wept in soreness of heart.

“I knew you would be pleased,” said Basil, accepting my lame congratulations in perfect good faith. “Dear Esther, if I made you sisterless once, I am giving you a sister now that ought to repay——”

“Oh hush, hush!” I cried a little wildly. “Do I want a sister, Basil? Do I want any one but you?”

And then I ran away and had my cry out, and hardly liked to come down to tea an hour later, lest they should see that my eyes were red.

It was a needless anxiety, for Basil had gone to the Vicarage—May Fielding was the vicar's eldest daughter—and as for the others, Charlie was not

observant, and my mother was too well pleased with the match to dream that any one else could have a different opinion. It was just what she had always wished, she declared, and the best thing that could have happened for Basil.

That was what tried me most in the week when every one was discussing the new engagement—they all seemed to think it such a fortunate thing for Basil. May was pretty and ladylike, and popular, and had a little money of her own from a maternal uncle; and what could a man want more?

"Such a desirable wife for a poor man," said my mother, beaming at me across the tea-tray. "An eldest daughter always learns to be useful, and May is very capable and managing, though she is so young. And her five hundred pounds is a nice little nest-egg for them to begin with."

I could not dispute it, and no doubt it is desirable that a man's house should be well managed, and that his wife should be ladylike and pretty, pleasant of speech, and fair to see—but was this all that a nature like Basil's needed? How long would pretty May fill and satisfy his heart?

"It is so nice that she is so musical," pursued my mother, complacently. "Basil is so fond of music, and May sings so well."

"That was what *did it*," said Charlie, knowingly. "I knew what would come of it when he was always taking his violin up to the Vicarage last winter, and coaching May on the harmonium for Sundays. But she is a jolly little girl, and no end of fun. I was awfully gone on her myself till I saw it was no use.

Of course I hadn't a chance when Basil went in too," said Charlie, humbly; and I think I had never liked my young brother so well as when he made that modest little speech. I could not resist giving him a kiss when my mother had gone, and he looked at me with quite a comical surprise.

"Dear old Esther," he said, affably, "don't mind about me, if that is what you mean. I daresay May wouldn't have looked at me even if Basil hadn't been in the way; and I'm not sure," ended Charlie, candidly, "if she's *quite* my style. Have you seen Miss Price, who is staying with the Fletchers?"

I resigned myself to a dissertation on the charms of "Charlie's last," as we had already learned to call the Fletchers' friend, but I fear that my thoughts were more with Basil than with him.

We had always been so much to each other, Basil and I—had always been such "chums," as Charlie called it—that I have no doubt I should have felt a little jealousy of any woman who had come between us with the imperious claims of a more engrossing love; but it seemed to me then that it was May's shortcomings that were the root and fount of all my pain. If she had been worthier I could have borne it better, I told myself—and perhaps I bore it all the better for the thought.

It was to be a long engagement, everybody agreed; even Basil, who, full as he was of a lover's impatience, had too much sense not to see the force of the argument on the other side. May was so young—only just eighteen—and Basil was, as my mother had said, a poor man. Rich indeed in youth, and hope, and natural gifts, in the strength and the will to

work, in power of brain and limb, and in the steadfast purpose which commands success, but poor in actual possessions.

My father's wish had been that he should go into the army; but Basil had no military tastes, and the doctors pronounced him physically unsuited. He had not then outgrown his delicacy, and he had certainly outgrown his strength. An out-door life in a temperate climate was what the physicians recommended, and my father, with much reluctance, withdrew his adopted son's name from Sandhurst and entered it at Cirencester. If Basil was to be a farmer, he should be one of the best class, and no expense should be spared in fitting him for the life he had chosen. So Basil kept his terms at the Agricultural College, and then spent a year on a Highland farm, and came back to us strong and well, and full of energy and hope. He was to take a farm himself as soon as the outlook for such an investment should be a little brighter, and meanwhile he was overlooking the management of two or three unlet farms on the Hazelford estate.

"It will give the boy something to do," said Uncle Chayter, "and I don't suppose he will lose more money on them than anybody else. At all events, it's better than letting the land run to couch-grass for want of being worked."

This was all very well before Basil was engaged, but no one could consider it enough to marry on, and sorely Basil chafed at the inadequate prospect before him. I wondered if May understood, as I did, the look of repressed impatience in his eyes, and the struggle with discontent that gave that droop to the

corners of his mouth. Did she understand? and did she sustain and console? But I knew well enough that the part of sustainer and consoler was Basil's, and not hers, and would be his all their lives. He would have to find the courage and the strength for them both. Would not May have done her part in looking pretty?

Very pretty she was, there was no disputing that. A small *svelte* figure, and hands soft and dimpled as a child's; a skin exquisitely fair, and with the loveliest bloom on the cheeks; eyes of a forget-me-not blue, and hair fairer than Basil's, but with golden lights in it that his had never known. No wonder that May Fielding was called the beauty of Hazel-ford; the wonder to me was that she had won the love of my brother Basil.

I used to sit and wonder over it all in the long summer evenings that Basil spent at the vicarage, or in walking with May. Now and then I could catch a glimpse of their figures amongst the trees in the garden, May in the light dainty muslins that were so becoming to her, and Basil walking beside her, and bending his fair head to hers. What was he saying? I used to wonder. I could not imagine Basil a commonplace lover, and I was sure that anything but commonplaces would fly far above the golden head beside him. Perhaps I was not quite just to pretty May in those days—but then, he was my brother, and I loved him so well—so well, that little as I liked the bride, I would have done anything in my power to forward the marriage, if, indeed, there had been anything in my power to do. And one night there came to me like an inspiration the

conviction that there was. I could hardly wait for the morning to lay my plan before Uncle Chayter, whose concurrence was, if not necessary, certainly desirable. I was six-and-twenty, and my own mistress; there was nothing to prevent my doing as I liked with my own. Still I felt that I should do it more smoothly and successfully with Uncle Chayter's consent than without it, and I appeared at the great white house in the High Street just as that most punctual of men was sitting down to his solitary breakfast. I had my scheme all ready, and felt that I could be even eloquent on the subject if my uncle were so misguided as to object. Here was Basil eager to marry, and only withheld by the want of means; and here was I, a single woman, with no thoughts of marriage, and with two thousand pounds standing in my name in the funds. That, with the same sum of his own, would furnish enough capital to take the Hurst Farm,—the object, I knew, of Basil's strong desire. Why should I not give him what was of no use to myself?

The argument seemed to me irresistible and I fondly hoped it would seem as cogent to Uncle Chayter. But I was not destined to lay it before him that day. The postman had been on the doorstep when I reached the house, and when I entered the breakfast-room my uncle was already reading a letter with every sign of excitement, and even of agitation.

"My dear," he said, looking over his spectacles, "I have heard from the Earl. He is coming home at last."



## CHAPTER IV.

### TWO PORTRAITS.

“Blest be the art that can immortalize.”—*Cowper*.

**T**HE news of the Earl's return took every one by surprise, and, I think, my uncle most of all. He had always deplored Lord Otterbourne's absence, and declared that it was ruining Hazelford ; while as for himself, it was absolutely painful to him to look at the empty castle, given over to an old housekeeper and a handful of servants, and contrast its present condition with the state that had been kept up in the late Earl's time ; but for all that, now that he had got his wish, I am not sure that the surprise was entirely a pleasant one. Uncle Chayter had come to the age when change no longer seems the natural condition of life, and when it is seldom a welcome experience. Old men like to keep to their accustomed grooves, to make to-day as much as possible like yesterday, and to ensure as far as they can that the few to-morrows left to them shall differ but little from to-day.

The Earl's coming could not but involve changes for every one in Hazelford, but most of all for Uncle Chayter. He would no longer be the autocrat of

Hazelford, the dispenser of favours, the universal referee. The regent would have no place when the sovereign returned ; the Earl's Agent would be a secondary person indeed when the flag that told of its owner's presence should float once more above the keep of Hazelford Castle. But, to do my uncle justice, I do not believe that considerations like these weighed for a moment against the loyal welcome he was prepared to give Lord Otterbourne, or had any share in the agitation he betrayed. He was agitated, certainly, as I could not but see. His fingers shook as he poured out his coffee, his voice shook as he invited me to join him, and when I explained that I had already breakfasted, I doubt if he even heard what I said. He was looking at the Earl's letter again, taking it up and putting it down in an aimless, flurried manner, very unlike his usual precise and formal movements. But I gathered from the disjointed remarks he let fall that it was the suddenness of the announcement, not the nature of it, that had discomposed him ; and he was certainly more inclined to speculate on what the Earl would do, and what he would be like, than to lament his own loss of consequence.

"Twenty years! Yes, it will be twenty years next Michaelmas since I saw him," he said, taking down a small oil-painting from the wall. "He will have altered since this was taken, and he will find me altered too."

A little melancholy crept into my uncle's tones ; he touched his bald forehead, and shook his head. I hastened to turn his thoughts from himself.

"Was that a good likeness when it was taken?" I

asked, looking with new interest at the picture I had seen so many times before. It represented a man between thirty and forty years of age, with a long, narrow face and a high forehead. The forehead was a little too retreating, but the nose was well shaped, and the chin was square enough to suggest power of will. The mouth was hidden by a moustache, but one felt it could only be refined. Anything coarse or sensual would have been too violent a contradiction of the rest. The colouring was of the prevalent English type, for which, strangely enough, we English lack an equivalent word,—too fair for “dark,” and too dark for “fair.” Altogether it was a pleasant face, and handsome too, if the artist had not flattered him ; but there was something sad about it, a melancholy in the fine brown eyes and in the lines about the mouth that always stirred my sympathies, perhaps because it seemed so incongruous in the face of a man young, and handsome, and prosperous, as was the Earl of Otterbourne twenty years ago.

“It is a nice face, but rather a sad one,” I said now, putting the portrait back in its place. “Was he as sad-looking as the artist makes him ? He must have been of a melancholy temperament, I suppose.”

“He was sad enough when that was taken,” said my uncle. “He had just lost his only child. It was a great blow, coming as it did just as he had succeeded to the title—but you know all about that, my dear.”

I have no doubt that I ought to have known, but I am afraid I had always thought my uncle’s stories of the Otterbourne family more than a little tiresome. Only very inattentive ears could have left me in such profound ignorance of the circumstances my

uncle alluded to. I tried to cover it by asking him if he had known the young Viscount.

"I never saw him—it all happened abroad. They were actually on their way home, I believe, for the Earl—Captain Hazelford he was then, you know—was somewhere in the East, and of course he came home when he found that the title had fallen to him. It was quite an unexpected thing. No one could have foreseen it a year before, with three good lives between. You have heard me tell of the sad fatality ——"

"Yes," I interrupted eagerly, for, at least, I remembered *that*. It was too dramatic a tragedy to be easily forgotten. I could have told as well as my uncle himself how the late Earl's sons, the little Viscount Hazelford, and his brother, the Honourable George, had gone boating with their tutor, and been drowned in sight of the Castle windows; and how their father had never held up his head again, and had died within the year.

My uncle looked at his letter again, and I wondered if I should have any chance of introducing my project about that useless two thousand pounds when he had read it once more. But as he laid it down he began to talk again of the subject of which his own mind was so full:

"It is very curious that the succession will pass out of the direct line again at the present Earl's death. It is a pity they had no other children; but I suppose the Earl is reconciled to his heir now, as he speaks of bringing him with him, and says that one of his objects in coming home is to introduce Colonel Hazelford to the people."

"Then Colonel Hazelford is the heir?"

"Why, dear me, yes ! I should have thought you knew that, Esther," said my uncle, severely. "What is the matter with you this morning, my dear ? It isn't like you to be so forgetful. There is nothing wrong at home, is there ?"

Then I took courage, and told him my tale. But though I did my very best to be clear and business-like, and to show my uncle that it would be the best possible thing for me as well as for Basil, he would only shake his head in what I felt to be a most discouraging manner.

"Don't you see it, uncle ?" I asked, when I had laid the whole case before him, and he would only look at me with disconcerting keenness, and shake his head in that exasperating way.

"Yes, my dear, yes, I see it—plainly enough," he said, in an odd kind of voice. "Good gracious, what fools men are, to be sure !"

It was such a curious deduction to draw, that I thought I could not have heard aright.

"Fools !" I repeated. "Do you mean *me*, uncle ?"

"No, I don't—or, at least, I didn't. But keep the word, child ; it fits uncommonly well."

"I don't think I am foolish," I said, with as much dignity as was compatible with a strong inclination to cry. "I don't see what better I could do with my money."

"Then be thankful your father had the sense to tie it up. You needn't bother your head about it, for, as a matter of fact, you can't touch a penny of it. It is settled on you and your children."

"But you are the trustee, uncle. You could let me have it, if you liked."

"And be prosecuted some fine day as a fraudulent trustee! No, my dear—I've told you what I think of the two principal parties in this precious scheme of yours, and I don't intend to make a third. It won't hurt Basil to wait, or Miss Fielding either. Come, be a sensible girl"—I had turned away my head, but I think he knew my eyes were full—and, indeed, the disappointment was more bitter than he could understand. I knew he meant well, but it was difficult to give up the hopes that had soared so high, difficult to renounce the hope of helping Basil. But I have come to think since that though my uncle would not—perhaps, indeed, could not—agree to my wishes, the conversation we had was not fruitless. At least it showed him Basil's need, and pointed to his desires.

"And now," said my uncle, "if you have nothing more to say——"

I had plenty more to say, but I understood the uselessness of saying it, and wished him good-bye, to his evident relief.

"Good-bye, my dear, good-bye. I'd walk back with you, but I shall have a hundred things to do this morning. Next Thursday week! Dear, dear! it's very sudden indeed. You'll tell them at home, of course. And if Basil could come down, I should be glad. Basil has such a head for figures, and I am getting old and pottering, I think."

I left my uncle standing on his door-step, nodding his bald head, and looking after me with a friendly smile. Dear old man, we were all fond of him, and if we laughed sometimes at his fussy and finicking ways, it was the genial laughter that is tempered by affection and respect.

I am afraid, if it had been any one but Uncle Chayter, we should have laughed at him very often indeed during the next ten days. He was so fussy and important, so burdened by the sense of his responsibilities, so anxious that the arrangements for the Earl's reception should be worthy of the occasion, and so perplexed by the absence of any precedent to guide him. If it had been a coming of age, or a return from a wedding-tour, it would have been simple enough; but how was Hazelford to receive an old gentleman who was a stranger to the county and the place, simply because he had never cared to make acquaintance with either? Ought there to be garlands and illuminations? and ought the tenantry to walk in procession? I believe the idea of a procession was very dear to my uncle's heart, but what was to be done about the rich tenant farmer at Coplehurst, who was a county magistrate, and altogether too influential and important a man to be expected to join?

. However, the matter was set at rest by a letter from the Earl, desiring that no demonstrations of welcome should be offered.

"I am a stranger to you all," wrote this scarcely genial man, "and Lady Otterbourne is an invalid. My object in coming to Hazelford is to seek repose, and my only wish is to be allowed to enjoy it."

So Uncle Chayter's fine schemes collapsed as completely as mine had done. I wonder if he had a sort of fellow-feeling for me—the little dry old man, who had set his foot so firmly on my plans? It touches me, as I record the history of that time, to recall many little acts of kindness and attention on my

uncle's part that were certainly quite a new departure, and that must have cost him a good deal of trouble in the midst of his accumulated business. New books arrived for me, "with Uncle Chayter's love," and though they were only new in the sense of being fresh from the booksellers' shelves, and "The Anatomie of Melancholy" and "The Vanity of Human Wishes" could not be called enlivening reading, I accepted them as tokens of goodwill, and perhaps of regret, and failed to see any significance in their titles, as I believe now that I was intended to do. Then, when books might be supposed to pall, great baskets of flowers appeared, bearing the same inscription; and one day my uncle's office-boy brought down a little hamper marked "This side up—with care," and out of it jumped a lovely little black kitten, with white chest and whiskers, that Charlie declared was the image of Uncle Chayter himself. Besides all this, my uncle often called for me, and took me with him to the castle, where I wandered about the great beautiful rooms while he transacted his business with the newly-installed butler, and with Mrs Fosberry, the old housekeeper, who was almost as much exercised by the impending arrival as my uncle himself.

A detachment of foreign servants had arrived, whose "heathenish talk and outlandish ways" had been quite too much for the good old lady.

"'Tis like nothing but the Tower of Babel, Mr Chayter, sir," she declared to my uncle, when we went up together to see the final arrangements on the morning of the eventful day. "Greeks there is, I know, and Armenians, and all the other people, I

make no doubt. And Mr Siva, my lord's own man, as came last night, is the outlandishest of 'em all. And there he is, sir," she ended, with a violent jump, as a dark, elderly man, with intensely black hair and eyes, passed softly and silently through the hall. "It gives me the creeps, it really do, the way he glimmers and glides about. You think he's safe the other side the house, and there he is at your elbow."

Mrs Fosberry looked apprehensively over her shoulder, as if she expected to see the dark-skinned valet beside her now, and breathed a sigh of thankfulness to find he was not there. "I can't abide blackamoors," she said, with a little shudder; "and what is the use, I should like to know, of a parcel of folks as talks like the Tower of Babel let loose, and can't say what they mean in plain English, not to save their lives?"

This was Mrs Fosberry's view of the situation, but my uncle and I were much relieved to find that the preparations for the important arrival had not been left to that worthy, but incompetent woman. She was indeed a care-taker rather than a house-keeper, and her principal avocation had hitherto been to conduct the British tourist over the famous castle, and describe its various treasures for his behoof, on the one day a week on which the public were admitted. Mrs Fosberry was wont to groan over the number of steps involved in the process, and to lament her rheumatism and the niggardliness of tourist nature, but I doubt if any mortal woman could have survived twenty years' seclusion in Hazelford Castle without that hebdomadal glimpse of her fellow-creatures, that weekly whiff of the outer world which must have

been as refreshing as fresh air in a pigeon-hole. And despite her grumblings now, there was an unwearying liveliness and brightness about her which suggested that the additions to the servants' hall might not have been entirely unwelcome.

"A sort of things they've brought with 'em, sure-ly," she observed confidentially; "and my lord's room is like a picture-gallery or a music shop, for pictures, and statuettes, and fiddles, and such. I was going to have 'em put in the picture-gallery along of the rest, but when Mr. Siva came he wouldn't bear of it. Would you like to see my lord's room, Sir and Miss, though it's more like a baron's stocidoo than a English gentleman's apartment?"

"*Nosce te sociis*," quoted my uncle, whose quotations, though made with much artless pride, seldom soared above the primers of his youth. "And my dear, if that is true of our friends, it is truer still of the silent companions we gather round us when leisure and—and funds permit," said the old man, sacrificing his peroration on the altar of truth with evident reluctance.

We followed Mrs Fosberry to a room at the end of the long suite of drawing-rooms. It seemed small after their vast proportions, but was itself a large and lofty room. The windows looked across the water-meadows, from which the morning mists had hardly yet lifted, to the blue sea-line flashing and sparkling half a league away. Down at our feet were the tiled roofs of Hazelford and the spire of Hazelford Church; the sound of the blacksmith's hammer came up clearly in the silence, the lowing of the dappled oxen browsing on the moist, green grass, the song of in-

numerable birds. As I stood in the pleasant room I wondered how its owner could have left it tenantless so long. Was not this sweet English scene worth visiting, at least when the sun was shining and the trees were green ?

There were still workmen in the other parts of the house, but here all seemed to be in readiness. The old oak floor was polished to the last degree of brightness, and covered with soft Eastern rugs; there were low easy-chairs and luxurious settees, and a moveable reading-table, with rack and lamp, stood by an invalid's couch. Tables of Florentine marble, whose value I dimly guessed at, stood about the room, littered with quaint shapes of costly pottery, with statuettes and intaglios and mosaics, with the glitter and grace of Venetian glass, and the soft dull glow of Benares work. In one corner was a grand piano, the case of ebony inlaid with silver, and near it were music-stands, violin-cases, and piles of music that seemed to have been just unpacked. There were pictures all about the room, some on the walls, some on stands upon the tables, some leaning against the shelves of cabinets, but all artistically disposed to catch the best effects of light; while by the window stood an inlaid easel, and on it a small picture, before which my uncle paused with an exclamation of startled admiration.

I had been more interested in the music than the paintings—Basil was so fond of music, and I thought he would be interested to hear about it—but as my uncle exclaimed, I went and looked over his shoulder. And then I, too, uttered a low cry of involuntary delight.

It was only a girl's head, but it was so exceedingly

and exquisitely beautiful that one felt something like the thrill of wonder and joy with which we greet the first spring flowers. There is a certain joy in perfect loveliness, a divine content that makes us understand the Creator's satisfaction when He saw the work of His hands, "and behold, it was very good." The little painting was evidently from a master's hand, though the style was decidedly modern. What a lovely face it was! All the hyperboles of poets seemed suddenly real as one stood before that glowing canvas. "Eyes dark as night"—how poor the simile seemed, how cold, how unworthy of the lustrous darkness of these, that was rather like a concentrated light. "Ebon tresses"—but ebony was dull beside the brilliant black of these the picture showed. "Coral lips"—it was a description that might fit a doll's, but not the soft glow of these, that melted imperceptibly into the creamy whiteness of the delicate skin.

"I wonder if it is a portrait?" said my uncle. "It doesn't look like a fancy head; but who can it be?"

"I don't know, sir," said Mrs Fosberry. But the answer was unexpectedly supplied.

"Pardon, Sahib," said the dark-complexioned valet, gliding over the syllables with a Hindu's smoothness—so different from the alert accent of his Mahomedan compatriot—"Pardon, Sahib, that is a portrait of Miss Temple, his lordship's ward.

"Then his lordship's ward is simply the most beautiful woman I ever beheld," said my uncle; while poor Mrs Fosberry stood gasping for breath at the unexpected appearance of the Hindu valet.



## CHAPTER V.

### HEREDITY.

“The grand old gardener and his wife  
Smile at the claims of long descent.”—*Tennyson.*

THE Earl and Countess had come, but, except for the flag flying from the keep, Hazelford would scarcely have been aware of the fact. The Countess was said seldom to leave her room, and in the month that had elapsed since his coming, Lord Otterbourne had not been seen beyond the precincts of the park, except as he descended from his carriage at the lych-gate on Sunday mornings, and walked up the path and the aisle that lay between that and the high-curtained family pew, where he disappeared from sight as completely as within the wall of Hazelford Castle. A young lady, “beautiful exceedingly,” accompanied him, and if I had possessed no other source of information, I should have known, from her resemblance to the lovely face I had seen on the easel, that she was “Miss Temple, his lordship’s ward.”

This was all that Hazelford saw of the “Castle people” in the first month of their coming amongst

us, and great was the discomfiture of the disappointed town. The village gossips had absolutely nothing to discourse upon, and the village tradesmen went heavily, as those who had increased their goods in vain.

"Orders his jints from Lunnon," said Mr Gibbs, the butcher, "which is what no earl as *was* a earl would demean himself to do."

Mr Gibbs' usually florid complexion suffered a decided increase of colour, and he stood at his shop door and glared wrathfully at the small boys who inquired ironically "if Christmas had come already?" Little Miss Cripps at the fancy shop, who had, I believe, launched out into the wild extravagances of gilt-edged note paper and ornamental fire-screens, looked at the unsaleable articles with tears in her eyes; and Mr Bayley, the draper—who might not cry, being a man, though a haberdasher—tore his hair, and muttered fiercely to himself, as he surveyed the boxes of "best white kids," rashly ordered in expectation of festivities at the castle that never came off. It was Uncle Chayter who had to bear the brunt of these complaints, and though he professed himself unable to do anything for the sufferers, I always thought my kind old uncle had something to do with a visit Miss Temple presently paid to the village, and the contemporaneous disappearance of Miss Cripps' abortive fire-screens and Mr Bayley's white kid gloves. Whether the high-art pasteboards, with their swallows, and daffodils, and bulrushes, and water-lilies, ever found their natural habitat in the empty fireplaces at the castle, I cannot say, nor

whether any enterprising wearer was discovered for Mr Bayley's two-button white kids; but certain it is that Mr Bayley and Miss Cripps agreed in declaring Miss Temple to be the sweetest and loveliest of her sex, while even Mr Gibbs condescended to remark approvingly that she had "a pair of eyes like gimblets, and a sweet pretty way with her tongue." How Miss Temple had vanquished the mighty Gibbs remained a mystery, for beef and mutton cannot wait a tardy customer with the same equanimity as pasteboard and kid. Perhaps it was "the eyes like gimblets" or the insinuating tongue. It was not every one who had Mr Gibbs' power of expression, but as to the fact, all Hazelford was as one man. Whatever the Earl and Countess might be—and opinions were dubious and various on that head—Miss Temple was peerless among women, as any one might see who had eyes in his head.

Uncle Chayter had been introduced to her, and, I could see, had fallen a hopeless victim on the spot; while Charlie wrote sonnets by the yard, and raved about her from morning till night. Even my mother caught the infection, and said there was something in Miss Temple's face that made her feel she would love her if she knew her.

"Basil says nothing?" I said, looking at the brother who, Charlie said, always made up my mind for me, and gave me my opinions in neatly-sorted packets. It was not true, of course, but certainly I always liked to know what Basil thought, and, I daresay, I generally ended by agreeing with him.

"What do you think of Miss Temple, Basil?" I

persisted now, for he had taken no notice of the indirect question of my last remark.

"Miss Temple is a very beautiful girl," he said, quietly, "but brunettes are not my style." And really it seemed a relief to find one man whose head was not turned by the new beauty's charms.

Perhaps Miss Fielding's lover had no eyes for any other woman, and perhaps, I thought rather maliciously, it was just as well for Miss Fielding if he had not. We had all been accustomed to think May the perfection of style as well as of beauty, but somehow her pretty languishing airs seemed schoolgirl affectations beside Miss Temple's stately ways, as her fair blonde beauty seemed to pale and fade beside the other's richer colouring and finer features. Even her dresses, deftly made by her own pretty fingers, and copied faithfully from the last number of the "Fashion Magazine," lost their effect beside the severely simple costumes which Miss Temple affected, and in which she looked so perfectly arrayed. However, pretty May seemed more than satisfied with her own appearance, and it was not for me to open either her eyes or any others.

It was, indeed, rather my business to learn to love and cherish the girl who was to be my brother Basil's wife, to shut my eyes to her faults, if faults she had, and loyally to accept her as my sister, without inquiring too closely if she was all I could have wished in that capacity. And, in spite of her little follies and affectations, I believed that May was both pretty and good. I saw more of her now than I had ever done before, and I could not but admit that under the

rather frivolous exterior there was a core of sound principle and affection. We all grew fond of the pretty, clinging creature, and if I could not think her worthy of Basil, perhaps there was no one whom I should have thought that. It was all the more exasperating to find that the Fieldings seemed to think it all but a *mésalliance*, and lamented "May's loss of position" and Basil's inferiority of birth.

"It is *that* that is the real drawback," Mrs Fielding said impressively, taking my arm, and lowering her voice to a confidential tone, as she walked me up and down the lawn at one of her garden parties. "I could have got over his being a farmer—though May might certainly have looked much higher than that—but a common soldier's son! Nice and good as dear Basil is, I had hard work to get papa to give his consent. But dear May had set her heart on it. I only hope he won't take to drinking, or anything that those sort of people do—no, no—of course I know he's as good and steady as can be, but one hears so much of heredity now-a-days, I can't help feeling there's just a little risk."

"But it was never really proved—it was only a conjecture after all, that he was Trumpeter Ford's son," I cried eagerly; but Mrs Fielding waved away the remark with a superior smile.

"Do you think it would be pleasanter to us to think of May's husband as a nameless foundling?" she asked severely, and angry as I was, I was really too crushed to reply.

When Mrs Fielding had left me, I sat down to recover myself, and just then Basil crossed the lawn

with May, and stood talking to her just opposite to me. There was a tall hedge of yew behind them, and Basil's face came out against the dark background of green, like a carving in low relief. I had never been more struck with the refined contour and chiselled traits. Was this the man whom Mrs Fielding professed to think in danger of developing low propensities? If Trumpeter Ford was like his son—and if *not*, where was the danger?—he must have been refined and fastidious to a fault. Who could look at Basil, and not see that his face was a witness of gentleness of nature, whatever his accident of birth? And for that matter, is there not as "blue blood" in the proletariat as in the House of Lords? and have not the descendants of Plantagenets and Tudors been found in far lower positions than poor Trumpeter Ford's? At any rate, it pleased me to fancy so, and I had credited the late Robert Ford, Trumpeter in Her Majesty's —th Foot, with quite a crowd of illustrious progenitors before my reverie was interrupted. If one must accept the theory of heredity at all, it is only fair to make it work both ways; and if features and character were any guide, I was abundantly justified in claiming for Basil ancestors who should have more than satisfied Mrs Fielding's views.

I do not think Basil even suspected the feelings with which he was regarded. He was proud and self-reliant, and had the sort of quiet confidence in his own position that I held to be another proof of good breeding; and though Mrs Fielding might discourse on his real or supposed deficiencies to me,

I suspect she stood secretly a little in awe of this tall and dignified young man who was to be her son-in-law, and who treated her with such unimpeachable courtesy.

To see her say good-bye to him, no one could have guessed that she was not thoroughly pleased with the match; but I could not help telling Charlie of our conversation, as he and I walked home together in the cool of the evening, if only to enjoy his indignation. Basil had hurried on to attend a practice of the glee-class, who were meditating a concert in aid of the organ that we hoped would soon replace May's harmonium in church, and Charlie and I were quite alone.

"Stupid old woman!" growled Charlie, when he heard of Mrs Fielding's injurious remarks. "Any idiot could see that Basil is a gentleman, whatever his father was."

And indeed I thought so too—and thought, moreover, that to have won the love of a man like that ought to be the crowning glory, as it must certainly be the supreme happiness, of any woman's life.

We could hear the singing-class in full swing as we passed the school-room where it was held, and where Mr Jay, the schoolmaster—a little man with a big voice—was their most effective bass.

"Double-bass, I should think," said Charlie, as the low deep *basso-profundo* seemed to drown all the rest. And then suddenly, like a lark springing up into the sky, we heard Basil's tenor, clear and pure and strong—such a contrast to the worthy schoolmaster's coarse, uncultured tones, that we both

looked at each other and laughed. Surely the owner of a voice like that could not have very low proclivities.

People tell me I am not musical, and certainly the subtleties of harmony are a sealed secret to me; but I could understand the sweetness of Basil's voice: it moved and thrilled me often to tears, and yet filled me with a sort of utter content that was like a benediction of peace. Cultivated, in the technical sense of being highly trained, it was not. My father had always rather shrunk from the thought of the deceased trumpeter, and had never fostered Basil's musical talent. But music was in him, innate, irrepressible, triumphant over every obstacle of discouragement and neglect. Basil sung as the birds sing, with notes as true and taste as pure. When he was quite a little fellow he made flutes for himself out of osiers and rushes, and a penny whistle became a magic pipe in his school-boy hands. At last he "trafficked" a six-bladed knife for an old fiddle with a schoolfellow, and discoursed such eloquent music upon it that my father could no longer withstand the heaven-born gift, and consented to his having lessons and an instrument of worthier tone. Can I not see him now, with the dumb wooden thing cuddled against his cheek, his head bent affectionately towards it, as if he were wooing it to speak, and the potent bow poised with a sort of tender hesitation ere it should wake the sleeping music from the shivering strings? I think he hardly knew when we were by when once his violin was in his hands. He was lifted into another world, caught

up into a seventh heaven beyond our grosser sense, where, perhaps, only May could follow him. Only May—that was the wonder of it. Charlie and I had neither of us the sixth sense, and all our sympathy could not give us the freemasonry that May possessed. And yet I think that music was not so much to her as to Basil—was a taste rather than a passion, a sense rather than a divine gift. One never felt that her nature was the richer and fuller and better for it, as Basil's was—only that her ear was accurate and her vocal chords in tune.

But no doubt Basil found more in her than I did. He told me himself one day that I was never quite just to May, and perhaps it was true, though Heaven knows I did my best to be so.

We did not see much of Basil in the next week. The singing-class and preparations for the concert took up all his spare time, but even my uncle could not say that he neglected his work. I say even my uncle, for I think he was a little hard upon Basil just then, sneering at lovers' follies—of which, certainly, he had as few as most men—and grumbling if he was not at the farms all day, though the early southern harvest was already gathered in, and there could be no immediate press of work. But every one knew that Charlie was my uncle's favourite—Charlie, who was supposed to be like him, and who was to be his heir. Uncle Chayter never forgot, as we so often did, that my brother Basil was not really of our kin.

I think Basil would have found it rather difficult to reconcile the conflicting claims of music, agricul-

ture, and love, if two of them had not run so amicably in double harness. But May was to sing in all the glees and choruses at the concert too, and was also to sing a solo, a song which I always liked, even when she sang it.

"Bid me discourse" is an ideal soprano song. It needs neither pathos, nor passion, nor fire. The least expressive voice can give it all the expression its roulades need, if it be but clear and high, and sweet; and May's had all these qualities, and a certain brilliance besides.

We were all going to the concert, as a matter of course, and when I went to take the tickets, Miss Cripps, at whose shop they were to be obtained, informed me with much elation that the whole front row was already engaged for a party from the Castle. I was glad to hear it, of course, but I could not imagine of whom the party could consist, for I knew there were no visitors there, and Lady Otterbourne never went out.

The mystery was solved when the night of the concert arrived, for though a whole row of seats had been taken, only two were occupied. Whether this was from exclusiveness, or from a wish to benefit the organ-fund I cannot say, but the "party from the Castle" resolved itself into the Earl and Miss Temple, who came in when the first part was half over, and sat down in the middle of the vacant row of chairs. Mr Jay was roaring out "The Wolf," and I was contrasting his singing with Basil's, and wishing I could stop my ears without hurting the little school-master's feelings. I think Miss Temple shared mine

at that particular moment. She sighed as she took her place with an air of resignation, and I saw her forehead slightly contract as she removed the wrap from her head. It was a white Deccan scarf, in which glittered threads of fine gold, and nothing could have been more becoming to the rich dark hair and creamy skin. Her dress was a long plain robe of dead gold plush, and round her neck were wound long strings of amber beads. Altogether, she was a new experience in the Hazelford school-room, a brilliant creature, beside whom May, in her new white tarlatan and blue ribbons, was

"As moonlight unto sunlight,  
And as water unto wine."

I saw Basil look from one to the other, and I wondered what thoughts were in my brother's heart as he sat on the platform facing Miss Temple, and looking before him with rather an abstracted gaze.

But Mr Ford was much too busy a person that night to have time for meditation on different types of feminine beauty. Musically considered, he was the mainspring of the concert, and I think he was far too much occupied to observe, as I did, how much attention the great man in front bestowed upon him. No doubt the Earl had come from a mixture of motives. It was a sort of duty he owed to the place, and there was the curiosity to see what local talent could do in a little town like Hazelford. That was how I construed his lordship's half bored, half quizzical air, and I fancy I was not far wrong. But all that was changed when Basil stood up with his violin, and drew his bow across the chords. He had

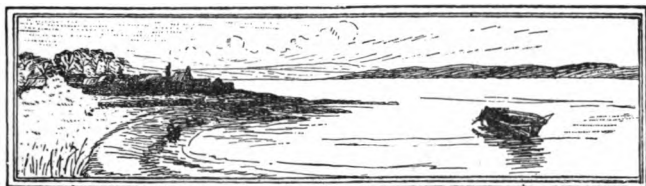
selected a *motif* of Raff's, as lovely as it was certainly difficult, and in the little pause before it I saw Lord Otterbourne lean across to Miss Temple, pointing her attention to the piece set down for Mr Ford, and saying something to her—no doubt something about the foolish ambition of musical amateurs; but at the first masterly touches, he broke off his unfinished sentence, and lifted his head with a look of quick and pleased surprise. He was a connoisseur himself, I knew, and I watched his face with ever-increasing pleasure, as it testified more and more to his delight in Basil's performance. When it was over the Earl led the applause till it culminated in a rapturous encore—an honour that was seldom accorded to classical music in Hazelford. The majority of the audience preferred "summat with a bit of toon in it," as Mr Gibbs expressed it, and only clapped now, I am sure, in response to the Earl's vigorous lead.

Our seats were in the second row, near to the end, and as the "Castle party" were in the middle of the row before us, I could watch them unobserved. I had never had more than a glimpse of the Earl, and I looked with a good deal of interest at the man who occupied so much of the attention of Hazelford, and who so evidently appreciated Basil. His hair was deeply streaked with grey, but his figure was erect and his carriage vigorous. The pose of his head was dignified, and the head itself well shaped, except for the rather retreating forehead. The eyes were soft and brown, and had a tinge of melancholy still, but the lines of the mouth suggested humour under the close grey moustache. Altogether, he was a distin-

guished and striking-looking man, and one that I must have noticed wherever I had seen him. I wondered, as I sat and looked at him, if I had seen him before, and though my reason told me it was impossible, I could not quite rid myself of the thought. I had *not* seen him, I told myself with some iteration, except for those brief glimpses as he passed to his pew on Sundays, but nevertheless I was haunted and puzzled by a sort of familiarity in his appearance, as of a half recognised face. I puzzled myself in vain to account for it, and yet surely it needed no accounting for; had I not seen his likeness so often that I ought to have known him if I had passed him in a London street? Only, it was not his face that seemed familiar: that was the puzzling thing. It was the turn of his head, the outline of his shoulders, as I sat behind him—just the things that no portrait ever shows.

He left before the concert was over, getting up after Basil's last song, which he had listened to with edifying attention and received with marked applause, and I saw him stop and speak to my uncle as he passed the end of our seat.

It was not till we got home that I knew what he had said; but my uncle went home with us to supper, and then we heard that the Earl had invited him to dine at the Castle the next night, and to take Basil with him.



## CHAPTER VI.

### A LUCKY GHOST.

“Names whose sense we see not,  
Fray us with things that be not.”

“**W**ELL, and how's the kitten?” said Uncle Chayer.

I did not think that my uncle had walked up, under an August sun, at eleven o'clock in the morning, just to ask after the health of the kitten, but I answered, demurely enough, “Quite well, thank you, uncle,” and waited to hear what he had to say.

“And how is Smut's mistress?” he asked, taking my hand in his, and looking at me with quite unnecessary anxiety.

“Smut's mistress is always well, uncle. Please dismiss the idea that she isn't.”

“Humph! Well, I suppose Basil has told you all about our doings at the Castle last night?” he went on, with a sudden suspicious keenness in his glance.

“He has told me nothing. He said he was too sleepy to talk last night, and he had gone out when we came down this morning. I suppose he has ridden over to Coombe Farm.”

“You suppose! A woman is always full of her

idiotic supposes about things she knows nothing about," said my uncle, who was certainly not in an amiable temper this morning.

"It seemed likely," I ventured to observe. "He generally does get up early when he goes to Coombe. It is further off than the Leazowes or Enderby."

"Chut, chut! do you think I don't know all that? Better than you do, I'll undertake to say. And I know something that you evidently don't. I know that Basil has not gone to Coombe to-day."

"Oh!" I said a little surprised. "How do you know that, uncle?"

"I know it because he breakfasted with me this morning."

"Uncle?" I was thoroughly surprised now, and something in my uncle's face quickened surprise into vivid curiosity. "Where is he now?" I cried, in some excitement.

"D'ye think I brought him back in my pocket?" growled my uncle, as his quick eyes followed my glance to the door, "Stroke your cat, and don't bother your head about Basil."

But though he spoke roughly, he was stroking my hand gently enough, and looking at me with a tender anxiety I could not understand.

"I wonder if women ever speak the truth?" he said next. "I wonder if I've done right to take you at your word—or if I'm a meddling old fool that's only made a mess of it? Were you in earnest when you came to me a month ago, all agog to set the bells ringing for Basil and May?"

I felt myself start, and flush and tremble, but it

was with the suddenness of the surprise and the pleasure of it.

"Do you mean that you have found a way of letting me have my money?" I cried, eagerly.

"Not I! I'd tie it up tighter than ever, if I could. You and your children, indeed!—it ought to be your children's children, lest any of them should inherit their grandmother's reckless disposition."

"Then what do you mean, uncle?"

"I mean that a piece of luck has befallen that cade lamb of yours. Lord Otterbourne wants to let the Home Farm, having about as much idea of farming as the bow of his own best fiddle—and, upon my word, Esther, he fiddles as well as Basil! A nice noise they made between them last night after dinner."

"Poor uncle!—but go on, please."

"Presently; I was coming to the point, if you wouldn't interrupt so. And it wasn't 'poor uncle' at all, I may tell you. Lady Otterbourne didn't appear, and I had Miss Temple all to myself, while the Earl and Basil tootled. Well, the gist of it all is that his lordship thinks a farmer who can fiddle like that is a *rara avis* to be caught at any price, and he offers him the farm at his own terms, or something very like it."

"And Basil will take it? But will his two thousand be enough to stock and work a farm like that, and pay the rent too?"

"No, you practical person; but if you're quite sure you approve of that match—and of course you understand that if Basil takes the Home Farm, he can marry as soon as he likes?—"

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I nodded comprehension, and sat down. My heart was beating high at the thought of Basil's happiness, but I felt a little unsteady with the suddenness and excitement of it all.

"Well," said my uncle, I was going to say that *if* you're sure you'd like it, I think it could be arranged. I'm about tired of trying to let farms that no one wants to take. The land is just going to ruin, and where the rents are to come from is more than I can say. Besides this, I'm getting too old and stiff to be running after other people's business all day. So it's about settled that Basil is to be sub-agent—a farmer makes twice as good a land-agent as a lawyer for a property like this—and he'll get the farm rent free by way of wages."

I took my uncle's hand and kissed it, for somehow I could not speak. This was the man I had been so angry with, and had thought so indifferent to Basil's welfare.

"Then they will be married at once, I suppose?" I said, when my voice came back.

"That's another of your precious supposes. D'ye think a girl like May can get her fripperies ready as quick as you could? No, he'll have to go to the farm by himself, while May hems her fal-lals, you'll see. He's gone to the Vicarage now to tell them all about it."

"Dear Basil! How pleased he must be!"

"He's glad enough, the young idiot," said my uncle, sourly. "And you're quite sure you approve? Honour bright, you know, Esther! It isn't too late to stop it all yet."

I did not know in the least what my uncle meant, or why he should persist in doubting my approval. Later, I guessed something of what was in his mind, but it was at once so foolish and so mistaken that there is no need to record it here. I hope that the assurances I gave him of my earnest desire to see my brother happy, and that in his own way, satisfied him of the baselessness, and above all of the folly, of his doubts.

It was late that evening when Basil came home—so late that my mother and Charlie had already gone to bed. I could not go. I wanted to see my brother, to congratulate him, to hear his plans, and share his joy. It was one of the lovely nights when autumn seems beautiful as summer. The moon was clear and bright, and the silvery light strong enough to read by, had I cared to read. I did not care; I preferred to sit by the window and watch for Basil.

At last I heard the step I knew so well, quick and light, and with a spring in it not to be mistaken. He was whistling as he came along, the low clear whistle, soft and sweet as the notes of a flute, that was so peculiarly his own, and I knew by the tone that things had gone well with him. How full of content it was! And when he turned in at the little gate, the moonlight fell on his face and showed it serenely contented too, and it seemed to me that the look of placid happiness that had scarcely satisfied me at first was exactly what I ought to have known that Basil would wear. Charlie might have indulged in poetic raptures, and frenzies, and ecstasies, and all that sort of thing, but not Basil. Basil was too proud

and too self-contained—or I thought so then. Whatever he felt, I told myself, nothing would ruffle the surface of a nature deep as his, and I admired him all the more for the calm I could not imitate.

“Up?” he said, seeing my white dress at the window, and coming in that way. “My dear girl, what possessed you to sit up for me till this time of night?”

“Oh, Basil! I wanted to see you, to tell you how very, *very* glad I am.”

“Uncle Chayter has told you, then? I thought he meant to steal a march on me when he bound me over to say nothing about it last night. I couldn’t but agree to his whim, for it is all his doing in a way, but I know very well it is you I have to thank.”

“No, indeed!” I cried, staving off thanks that I felt I could not have borne. “But tell me all about it, Basil. Is not May delighted?”

“There is not much to tell,” said Basil, smiling at my eagerness; and indeed I think I was the more excited of the two. “They are pleased, I think—that is Mr Fielding and May. Mrs Fielding—well, I am not so sure about her. She said a good deal about there being no scope here for a ‘rising young agriculturist,’ and I’ve a suspicion she would like me better as an ‘agriculturist’ at a distance than as a farmer close at hand.”

It was my own opinion, but I would not confirm it. Instead, I asked him if he had seen the house at the Home Farm.

“I went over it this morning.”

“And do you think it will do?”

"The farm will, certainly. It has always been worked with a bailiff before, and no expense spared. The buildings are a sight, and the dairy a model. They've separators and automatic churns, and everything that means certain outlay and uncertain returns!"

"You ungrateful young man!"

"I shall be grateful enough, if May will only like it," said Basil, with a look of wonderful sweetness.

He stood musing a little while, and then looked up with a laugh at his own forgetfulness.

"I declare I'm keeping you waiting, and I'm quite ready, too. Good-night, Esther."

He stooped and gave me the kind fraternal kiss that never failed, and went upstairs, singing softly under his breath a fragment of "My Queen":

"Where and how shall I earliest greet her?  
What are the words she first will say?"

It was too late to ask that now! He had got a long way past that initial stage of wonder and mystery, and the dawn of unknown fate. He had met his queen and owned her sway, and if some of us thought her unworthy of the homage he gave her, I knew well enough that no perception of his own superiority ever crossed his loyal soul.

I turned out the lamp and went upstairs, pondering many things. Basil stood by his own door, waiting apparently for me, and as I came near, I saw there was a gleam of laughter in his eyes.

"I forgot to tell you why old Jones is going to leave the farm," he said, looking very much amused.

"Is that the bailiff?"

"Yes, that apple-faced old man that sits to our right in church. A decidedly prosaic and practical old party, you'd think, to look at him, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, indeed. He looks as if he hadn't an idea in his head."

"Well, he's going because he's seen a ghost!"

"Nonsense, Basil!"

"He says so, at any rate. Twice he's seen it in the last month, and he daren't stay for fear it should come again. He thinks it a warning; and three warnings are always fatal, you know."

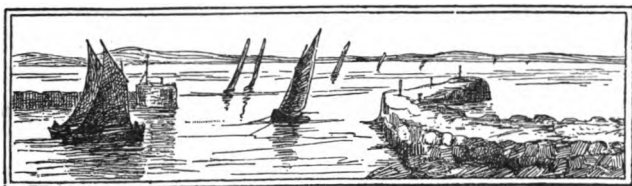
"What was it like?"

"Oh, the regular thing—white sheet, and all the rest of it."

"And was it in the house?"

"No, in the park, I believe. Silly old man! It was most likely a poacher, if it wasn't his own fancy on the top of an extra glass of beer. However," ended Basil, with another laugh, "it has been a lucky ghost for me, and I'll make it my best bow if it ever comes my way."





## CHAPTER VII.

### AT THE HOME FARM.

“Some things are of that nature as to make one’s fancy chuckle.”—*John Bunyan.*

WE all went over the next day to see the Home Farm, or Deer Park House, as Mrs Fielding insisted it should be called. She had found the more aristocratic appellation in an old county atlas, and had also discovered that the house of which her daughter would presently be the mistress had been originally a manor house—a fact from which she appeared to derive much harmless gratification. Mrs Fielding treated us to quite an archæological lecture on the subject of May’s future home as we walked there through fields of yellow stubble, and by hedge-rows bright with briony wreaths, and all the glories of changing leaf and ripening berry. Basil and May had gone on a little way ahead, having, no doubt, more interesting matters to discuss; but when we reached the farm, they went into the house with the elder ladies, to look over it, and decide what alterations would be needful before Basil should bring his bride to it; and Charlie and I waited outside, and

talked to Mr Jones, whose wife was acting as cicerone within.

Mr Jones was a stolid, good-tempered man, about fifty years of age, with rosy cheeks streaked like an apple, and an expression of almost bovine placidity. Any one less likely to be the victim of fancy could hardly be imagined, and yet, according to Basil, he was about to throw up a comfortable situation, and to leave what had been his home for years, for an imaginary ghost, that could have been at most an optical illusion or a practical joke.

"So you have made up your mind to go, Mr Jones?" I said, by way of opening the conversation, for Mr Jones only seemed equal to leaning against the gate and smiling at us affably, while he nibbled a bit of straw in an off-hand manner, as if to assure himself that he was perfectly at ease.

"Ees, miss, that I hev."

"And all because of the ghost, Jones?" put in Charlie, who wanted to hear the story at first hand.

"Well, 'twere partly along o' that, Mr Graham, and partly along o' other things," said the bailiff, cautiously. I think he detected the laughter in Charlie's voice, and rather resented it.

"You'd a very good berth here, I should think," said Charlie, looking round at the buildings that Basil admired so much, but that, however useful they might be, were not picturesque enough to awake feminine enthusiasm.

"It wa'n't amiss," conceded Mr Jones. "But Mr Graham, sir, 'twas all very well working under Mr Chayter, but 'tis another matter now. Mr Chayter's

a lawyer, no doubt, as is a thing he can't help, but he's a gentleman with a deal of understanding, and a right down good judge of cattle. 'Twere a pleasure to work with a gentleman like he, but the Earl's no good at all. Fiddles and flutes is his line; but as for farming, he don't know a yearling from a two-year-old, nor a turmot from a swede. And for gentlemen like him to come poking here, and prying there, and trying to look as if they understood what they was talking about, 'twould make a pig laugh to hear 'un."

"But surely you're not going because the Earl doesn't understand farming?" I said; and Mr Jones shifted his weight uneasily from one foot to the other, and looked conscious and mysterious.

"It *is* the ghost, then!" cried Charlie. "Come, Jones, tell us all about it."

"Well, sir," said Jones, reluctantly, "I don't know as I'm perticklar fond of talking about it, but 'tis no use denying of it when I'm asked. It ain't the sort of thing as a man of my age looks for to see, and it upset me a bit on that account. Ghostises mostly favours young gells, and lads as have had a drop too much, but see it I did with my own eyes, or I'd never have believed it."

"Where did you see it?" asked Charlie.

"I see it first, Mr Graham, the very night as the family came to the Castle. It seemed to come out of the private door—as is allays kep locked, you know—and walked sort o' gliding like, quite swift and silent down the park. And the next time I see it, it done just the same, coming out of the little door in

the Castle, and going gliding, gliding along till it come to that coppice you see over there. It went right into the coppice, and I were that skeered I didn't stay to see no more, but ran and told my missus what I'd seen. 'Whativer didn't you foller it for?' the missus says, as bold as brass—for she hadn't a-seen it, you know," said Jones, with a sly twinkle; "but ghostises is unked things, and I thought I'd better just let her be."

"Was it a she?" inquired Charlie, with much interest.

"It had the shape of a woman, Mr Graham, sir," said Jones, solemnly—"a young woman, with long black hair, and a white dress——"

"Some of the Castle servants sweethearting," cried Charlie; but Mr Jones heard him with the tolerance of superior information.

"That's what young gentlemen natrally thinks. Mr Ford made the same remark, as was likely, being a-courting himself," said Mr Jones, allowing the corner of his mouth not occupied with the straw to relax into a smile. "But I made bold to ask about it at the Castle the next morning, and Mrs Fosberry herself told me as only my lady and Miss Temple has the key of that door. And I leave you to judge if 'twere either of them!" ended Mr Jones, crushingly.

"And you've never found out what it was?" I asked.

"Not no more nor I've told you, miss. It come out of the Castle, and it went into the coppice, and that's all I knows about it. Skeered I was, I don't deny. Fifty 'ear I've lived, and paid my way, and

such a thing I never seen. But there, we must all come to our latter end in time. A warning it were, I make no doubt, Miss Graham, and I've made my will and all conformable. Mary Ann sha'n't have it to say as I didn't do handsome by her and the little 'uns, that her sha'n't."

Poor Mr Jones's honest voice failed him, and his face assumed a lugubrious expression that I could see was a trial to Charlie's gravity. I was not sorry to see the party of inspection issuing from the house, with "Mary Ann," a comely, shrewd-looking little woman, bringing up the rear. However absurd poor Jones's delusion was, he was a long way past being laughed out of it by Charlie.

Before he left the farm, however, I believe Basil talked to him seriously of the folly of such fancies, and Mr Fielding and my uncle tried both argument and reproof, but all without effect. He was too obstinate and illogical to be open to conviction, and I believe he finally departed to "fresh fields and pastures new," firmly convinced that he had received two-thirds of a "call," and congratulating himself that his hasty departure from the neighbourhood had "done the ghost," and so averted the final summons.

It was not till nearly Christmas that Basil was installed in his new home. The house was given over to workmen, and as Basil had to enter on the farm at once, he rode backwards and forwards every day, setting out in the clear frosty mornings while the rime was still on the grass, and not returning till sunset, and sometimes not even then.

The Earl took a good deal of notice of the young

man who had become so close a neighbour, and whose tastes were so similar to his own, lending him books both on music and general subjects, and asking him several times to dine at the Castle, and take his violin; and though Basil was the last man who would have borne patronage in any form or shape, music is a bond that "levels upwards," and he received the invitations as simply as they were given. The music-room at Hazelford Castle was rich in the best editions of the greatest masters, and Basil revelled in these musical treasures with a delight that only musicians know. Not less entrancing were the perfect instruments and rare manuscripts; and his talk when he came home from an evening at the Castle was all of Cremonas and Stradivarius violins, of Pergolesi and Mozart, of Mendelssohn, and Raff, and Wagner.

My mother had a natural curiosity as to the home life of Basil's noble hosts, but it was seldom gratified. She had literally to drag from him the details her feminine soul delighted in, and it seemed to me that with every visit he became a little more reserved. He was put through almost the same catechism every time. How was the dinner served? and how many courses were there? Did they really have it *à la Russe* when they were by themselves? Basil never knew any of these particulars, but my mother condoned his ignorance as a masculine foible, and went on with her questions. Had he seen the ladies? *Not* the Countess. It was very odd she never appeared! Did Basil think she was as proud and exclusive as people said, or was it really her health?

And Miss Temple? Had he found out if she was related to the Earl and Countess, and did she look as lovely close at hand as at a little distance.

"Really I didn't notice," said Basil, rather shortly, when the question was pressed, for my mother did not seem to see, as I did, how averse he was from describing his visits to the Castle. Why he should be so I did not know. Perhaps it seemed to his fastidious nature a breach of the unwritten code of hospitality, or perhaps he was unwilling to appear to boast of the intimacy that was evidently springing up. He always answered as briefly as courtesy permitted; and though May was quite as curious as my mother, I fancy she received as little information.

"Basil thinks it high-treason if we ask him anything about the Castle," she said one day, when she was spending the evening with us. Basil had been dining with Lord Otterbourne the night before, and was certainly rather less communicative than usual.

"What is Miss Temple like, Basil?" she persisted. "To talk to, I mean, and that sort of thing. Of course, I know she is pretty."

"Oh!" from Basil, in a tone of protest that made his betrothed open her forget-me-not eyes in genuine surprise.

"Yes, certainly," she said, with an air of magnanimity; "I quite admit that, and I can't understand your not thinking so. But what sort of a girl is she? What is she like?"

"Like?" said Basil, dreamily; "I don't know that she is like anything—unless it is Pergolesi's Gloria."

I laughed at the dreamy tone and quaint comparison, but May did not look pleased.

"You might answer a rational question rationally," she said, with a toss of her pretty head.

"Yes," said Charlie. "I always knew Basil was music-mad, but I didn't think he was quite so cracked as that."

He said it so comically that May laughed, and somehow the laugh seemed a safety-valve. There had been something electric both in Basil's looks and hers—an indefinite disturbance that seemed vaguely ominous. It was decidedly a relief when my mother asked if the colour of the drawing-room at Deer Park House was settled yet, and the two young "persons about to marry" glided smoothly off on the safe lines of household decoration and the tints of chair-covers and curtains.





## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE GHOST AGAIN.

“What beck'ning ghost along the moonlight shade,  
Invites my steps and points to yonder glade?”—*Pope.*

“I ’M sure that dear boy is getting quite low-spirited,” said my mother, plaintively. “It is dreadful for him, these long dull evenings, all alone in that great empty house. And I doubt if Mrs Munns airs his flannels properly—she was always rather careless about airing.”

Mrs Munns was an old servant of ours, recently widowed, who had consented to “do for Master Basil” till his marriage. That was not to take place till the summer, when it was considered that May’s initiation into country life would be made under the most favourable circumstances, and if Basil found it hard to wait, he was too unselfish to complain. Nevertheless, I agreed with my mother that he looked depressed. He had lost his usual cheerfulness, and when he came over to see us, he was often absent and abstracted, and almost gloomy. But he persisted that he was both well and happy, urging the latter with so much insistence that I felt sure he suspected us of blaming May for not consenting to

an earlier marriage, and would own to nothing that seemed to reproach her. But in truth I did not blame May at all. I believed she would have been as willing to go to him under grey December skies as under the blue heaven of June, and I did not see how she could have set herself in opposition to her parents' wishes in the matter.

I think that the winter was passing heavily for pretty May, too. The Home Farm was scarcely a mile away as the crow flies, but it lay on the opposite side of Hazelford Park, and the road to it swept round the base of the great hill on which the Castle stood, so that Basil had four miles to ride or walk whenever he came to see his lady-love. It was true that he had permission to pass through the park, but that was only feasible in the day-time. The side gates were locked at dusk, and if they had not been, it would have been scarcely possible to find one's way through the park in the dark of a winter's night. So Basil was virtually four miles away, and when the snow came, and made the park a pathless white desert, and the high road almost impassable, we seldom saw him more than once or twice a week. My mother, who had certainly no lack of maternal feeling for Basil now, became quite concerned about him, was sure he was "moped," and that Mrs Munns did not attend properly to his comfort, and finally decided that someone ought to go and look after him, and that the someone should be myself.

I was very willing to go. The prospect of a week with the brother I loved so well was not without its charms, and if I was not as anxious as my mother, I

certainly thought that Basil looked paler than usual, and seemed depressed in spirits. No doubt he found the solitude of the Home Farm dull after the lively nonsense that Charlie always found for us at home, and no doubt he missed the daily meetings with May, and the evenings at the Vicarage even more. I could not be as amusing as Charlie, and certainly I could not hope in the most distant manner to be a substitute for May, but I flattered myself that my company might be better than none, and consented to go if Basil should be found to take the same view.

Apparently Basil thought it very much better indeed. He received the proposition with quite disproportionate gratitude, drove over for me himself, with the dog-cart piled with rugs, and talked all the way back of my "amazing goodness in coming to share his loneliness in an out-of-the-way hole like that."

"It is only out-of-the-way in winter," I said cheerfully; "and next winter, dear Basil, you will not be alone."

Basil flicked the horse and said nothing, and I wondered if he had heard. I knew enough of driving to be aware that the steadiest of steeds can be supposed to require immediate attention if the driver does not wish to give an immediate reply, but what was there in my harmless remark to make Basil wish to avoid a reply? I doubt if I should even have fancied such a thing, but for the elaborate unconsciousness with which he gave all his attention to the not very difficult task of guiding Brown Bess along the wide and solitary road. Dear Basil! he

need not have feared that I should obtrude my sympathy upon him ; but the fact that it no longer seemed acceptable showed me more plainly than anything I had noticed yet that the three months he had spent alone had altered him.

I glanced furtively up at him, as he towered above me on the high-piled cushions, and thought that physically, at least, the alteration was only an improvement. He looked older and more manly, and I told myself with pride that even Uncle Chayter could not have called him "boyish-looking" now. Yet it was difficult to say wherein the alteration lay. Fair and beardless as a boy's the clean-shaven face was still, but no boy's mouth sets itself in quite such resolute lines, and I was obliged to own, however unwillingly, that boys' faces do not bear the impress of hard and painful thought, of anxiety and struggle, as Basil's did, even to my reluctant eyes.

We drew up at the door of Basil's new home just as the sun was setting behind the pine-trees in the park, and the whole scene seemed to me the perfection of winter beauty. There was snow on the dark branches, and the park and fields were a level waste of white, just touched with crimson where the stems of the trees and the snow lying between them caught the sunset glow. The sky was cloudless, and the sun itself a ball of crimson in an amber sea.

"Winterly, isn't it?" said Basil. "There is no sign of the frost giving yet."

He helped me down from the dog-cart and took me into the house, where Mrs Munns stood smiling

at the door, and a cheerful fire burned in the large, old-fashioned hall.

"You must put up with bachelor's quarters, you know," said Basil, apologetically; but I thought there was very little to put up with.

The dining-room was as cheerful as the hall—a pleasant room with a bay-window, an oak wainscot, and a low raftered ceiling, on which the fire flickered cheerily. Mrs Munns had set out a bountiful meal with a care that seemed to show more attention to Basil's creature comforts than my mother had expected, and altogether I came to the conclusion that he was not so very much to be pitied, at least as far as outward circumstances went.

That he was a man with whom they would go a very little way indeed, I knew very well, and it was not long before I began to suspect that some unconfessed anxiety or trouble lay behind his change of look and manner. Had Mrs Fielding been showing her disapprobation of the match? I wondered, or had May's vapid prettiness begun to pall—too late? I had to content myself with wondering. Basil made no approach to confidence, and, indeed, I learnt more from Mrs Munns than from himself.

The report she gave was not likely to allay my mother's anxiety. She said that Basil was certainly out of health or out of spirits; that he sat and brooded for hours at night, and that his appetite was so bad she did not know what to get him to eat.

"And when he don't sit staring into the fire, Miss Esther, 'tis worse, for he gets his fiddle, and plays the fearsomest tunes you ever heard. Creepy they are,

and when we're alone in the house they just make my blood run cold. If he plays like that at the Castle, 'tis a wonder they ever axes him again."

"Does he go there often?" I asked, with some little compunction. Only my great anxiety could have induced me to seem to play the spy upon my brother.

"Every now and again," said Mrs Munns; and I was ashamed to ask how often that might mean.

Basil himself scarcely spoke of the Castle at all, and during the week I saw none of the inmates. The snow was a barrier both to walking and driving, and besides this, Lady Otterbourne was ailing, and Miss Temple was in close attendance upon her. It seemed likely that I should have to go back without seeing any of Basil's noble friends. A week soon comes to an end, and though Basil wanted me to prolong my visit, I was doubtful if I could be spared.

"Do you know what is the matter with Lady Otterbourne?" I asked, as we sat at supper the last night of my stay.

"They never say directly," said Basil; "but I can't help fancying it is a sort of melancholia. The Earl told me she had never been the same since the death of her child, and Miss Temple never likes to leave her for long at a time."

"You have never seen her, have you?"

"Only once, just for a minute. She came into the music-room once when I was there, and went out again as soon as she saw her husband was not alone. She is very small, and fair, and delicate-looking, her hair quite white, and her eyes bluer than May's."

"Then they must be blue indeed! May's are the

bluest I ever saw, except yours when you were a little boy."

"Lady Otterbourne's are quite a different colour from May's—much darker and deeper in shade. It is the difference between sapphire and turquoise."

I thought myself that sapphires, with their dark pellucid brightness, might very well stand for an apt simile of his own, but Basil and I never wasted compliments on each other.

He went very near transgressing the tacit rule, however, when he wished me good-night.

"How I shall miss you!" he said, looking down on me with something like his old sweet smile. "You don't know all that your visit has been to me—all that perhaps it has saved me from."

"Saved you from? What do you—what *can* you mean?"

"Nothing that you could understand, child, or would believe if you could. I think that just to be yourself, so loyal, and true, and pure, is the best sermon you could preach. Sophistries fly before your simple uprightness; one understands that duty comes first—is the first thing and the last, and that if one can only do it, nothing else matters much."

"*Your* duties are surely not difficult ones," I said, wondering at the suppressed emotion in his face and voice. "Is it so very hard to be patient, my poor Basil? June seems a long way off now, no doubt, but it will come——"

"Oh yes!" he said, with a sudden jarring laugh, "it will come. Why do women always think platitudes so consoling?"

He stepped back into the room and shut the door, and I went upstairs in a painful agitation that was difficult to bear. I could not understand Basil—had he not admitted it himself?—but I understood that he was troubled and tried in some way I did not know, and perhaps even tempted to wrong-doing. What else could I think as I recalled his words and looks? and that I was absolutely unable to guess what the trouble was only added to my perplexity, and took nothing from my pain.

I wished I could have stayed with him, especially if, as he said, I did him good. He needed help and comfort, I was sure, little as there was in his position that suggested the need of either. Had all Uncle Chayter's kindness been thrown away, and had Basil really been happier before his wedding-day was fixed? Surely he must have been finding out, as so many a man has done before, that a pretty face is not everything in a woman, and perhaps he was learning how little beside a pretty face there was in May Fielding.

"But she will improve," I told myself, as I listened to the wailing tones of Basil's violin. "Who could be Basil's wife and not improve? It will be a case of 'Locksley Hall' reversed; and if he is fancying now that he no longer loves her, she will grow to his ideal day by day, and he will end by adoring the nobleness that his own nobleness has created."

It was a fanciful prophecy, no doubt, but at least it served to comfort me, and to enable me to listen with compassion rather than despair to the despairing strains that came up in the silence like the cry of one

in stress of overmastering pain. If that was how Basil relieved his solitude, no wonder Mrs Munns called his playing "creepy." Little as I understood music, I knew that this was full of a strange and weird power, that Basil was playing as I had never heard him play before, and that there was infinite pathos in the passionate sounds. Presently they ceased, but the echoes seemed to linger in my heart. "There must be something uncanny about the house," I thought. "Old Jones gets illusions, sees visions, and I daresay dreams bad dreams; and Basil plays as if he and his violin were both bewitched together."

I suppose it was the association of ideas, but something impelled me when I had put out my light, to undraw the white dimity curtain, and look out into the clear, moonlit night. It was so light as to be actually dazzling. The moonlight glittered whitely on the white snow, and was reflected from it; the snow stretched away, a sheet of dazzling whiteness, under the silvery beams. I could see right across the park to where the Castle stood, a stately moonlit pile, with its deep black shadow sharply outlined on the snow. And as I gazed, I thought that I too must be infected with the spirit of the house in which I was. It could be only a delusion, but though I rubbed my eyes till they were sore, I could not rid myself of the impression that a white figure such as Mr Jones had described had issued from the private door in the Castle, and was making its way over the snow in the direction of the coppice.

I threw my dressing-gown round me, and ran downstairs.

"Basil!" I panted, "I have seen it—I have seen the ghost!"

Basil did not answer, and for a moment I thought he was asleep. His arms were folded on the table, and his head was resting on them in an attitude of utter weariness. The violin lay on the table, with a broken string lying loosely across it, and a vase of flowers overturned beside it seemed to show that it had been flung impatiently aside. I remembered all these things afterwards, but at the time I was too excited to notice them.

"Basil, do you hear?" I cried: "I have seen the ghost!"

He lifted his head and looked at me in a dazed sort of way, and even in the midst of my own excitement I was struck with the pallor of his face and the pain in the "sapphire" eyes.

"The ghost?" he said, with a faint incredulous smile. "My dear Esther, you have been dreaming. Go to sleep again."

"I have not been to sleep," I interrupted, "and I saw it as plainly as I see you. Do come upstairs and see! It came out of the little door, and went down the park and into the coppice, just as Mr Jones said, and——"

"And that pork-pie Mrs Munns sent us in for supper evidently didn't agree with you," said Basil, finishing the sentence for me in a way I had certainly not intended. "Let me feel your pulse. Why, my dear child, it must be going hundreds to the minute! and your teeth are chattering, and your hands like ice. You don't mean to say you believe that nonsense of



**“ ‘BASIL ! I HAVE SEEN IT—I HAVE SEEN THE GHOST.’ ”—Page 88.**



old Jones's? Really, Esther, I thought you had more sense."

"There really was *something*," I protested, but Basil would only laugh at me. Certainly the ghostly theory seemed much less plausible in the light of the warm, fire-lit room and Basil's sarcastic smile, and I went upstairs at last, cheered and warmed and comforted, and more than half inclined to laugh at myself as the victim of my own foolish fancy.

Basil was out when I came down the next morning, and I would not excite Mrs Munns' ridicule by saying anything about the ghost. She brought a note in for Basil while I was waiting—a square, coroneted envelope, addressed in a clear feminine hand.

"From the Castle, miss," she said, as she laid it by Basil's plate. "They'll be having gay doings there before long, if all is true one hears."

"I think very little is true that one hears," I said repressively, for I knew Mrs Munns' weakness for gossip of old. "There was a clever man once, Mrs Munns, who used to say that it was wisest to believe nothing you heard, and only half you saw."

"Did he, now?" said Mrs Munns. "He must have been a *curis* gentleman, miss, if he didn't believe his own eyes."

I was too much in the "*curis* gentleman's" case myself to enter on an argument, and indeed argument was not Mrs Munns' desire. Obviously, she had heard some fresh bit of gossip, and was burning to deliver herself of it. She fidgeted about, rearranging the knives and forks and spoons, that were already adjusted to the sixteenth of an inch, and then she

moved the coroneted letter to the other side of Basil's plate, and looked at it reflectively.

"Yes, miss," she said, just as if I had spoken, "Jack Brenton, the boy that brought the letter, told me that Colonel Hazelford is down at the Castle again. You remember him, miss?—the tall, light-haired gentleman as was staying at the Castle at Christmas."

"No, I was not here at Christmas."

"I thought perhaps you might have seen him in Hazelford," said Mrs Munns. "A handsome gentleman he is, and free and pleasant-spoken. He'll be the Earl some day, miss, you know, and they say he's to marry Miss Temple."

Basil was coming in at the door as she spoke. He must have heard—he did hear, I knew, for he paused just the fraction of a second, and in his face was something that told me that the news was a surprise to him. If it had been any one but Basil, I could have fancied that it was not only a surprise, but a shock. He put out his hand with a sudden aimless gesture, and then he caught at the door and steadied himself against it. The next moment he came into the room, and wished me good-morning in his usual manner and with his usual kiss, and except that his lips were cold—as any man's might have been on a morning like that—there was nothing to make me fancy, as I had done for a moment, that the news he had just heard had any special interest for him. He sat down in his place at the table, and read his note, and then he handed it to me.

"DEAR MR FORD,—The Earl would be glad if you could come and see him about the new cottages at

Coombe on Thursday instead of to-morrow. Colonel Hazelford came unexpectedly last evening, and the Earl will be engaged with him both to-day and to-morrow.—Yours very truly,

“ELLINOR DIEUDONNÉE TEMPLE.”

“What a curious name!” I said, looking at Miss Temple’s signature. “But it seems to suit her. A girl with a face like that ought not to have a commonplace name.”

“No,” said Basil, briefly.

He took his letter again, and put it into his pocket, and then he looked at me, and observed, with a touch of satire in his tone—

“That was a tolerably substantial ghost of yours last night! I took the trouble to wade through the snow in the park this morning, and there were foot-steps all the way from the side door to the coppice.”





## CHAPTER IX.

### FOOTPRINTS IN THE SNOW.

“Dumb witnesses the silent Night betray,  
And bare its secrets to the eye of Day.”

THE discovery that the “ghost” was of so corporeal a nature as to leave visible footsteps behind it was rather pleasant and consoling than otherwise, but the wonder that was lessened in one direction only increased in another. Who could it be that had taken that midnight walk, and left those silent witnesses of the fact? Basil thought it right to communicate his discovery to the house-keeper at the Castle, but I heard afterwards that no one could throw any light on the mysterious occurrence. It was quite true, as old Jones had said, that the side door only led to the ladies’ apartments; and though, of course, the key might have been abstracted, there was not the slightest clue to indicate by whom or for what reason.

We were still discussing the perplexing mystery when Uncle Chayter rode up to the door. He came in, stamping the snow from his boots, and looking decidedly cold and unamiable, and tossed a letter into my lap.

"There," he said. "You'll please yourself, of course, but, if I were you, I wouldn't mew myself up here any longer. Basil's had enough of you, I'm sure, and *I* want you back—but, of course, you don't care for that."

"Does the mother say she may stay?" said Basil, eagerly.

He always spoke of our mother as "the mother"—not "*my* mother"—though I am sure he gave her the respect and affection of a son. It was a joke against him that he still kept up, in speaking to her, the "mamma" of our childish days. But I, at least, understood that he would not give the name of "mother" to any but his own. It was the one little bit of sentimentality in Basil's unsentimental nature, and I used to wonder sometimes if our own dear mother, with her dark refined face and gentle gracious ways, was not more truly akin to her adopted son than the loud-voiced, kindly, but decidedly vulgar woman who had brought him to our charpoy, and who, I had little doubt, was the wife of poor Trumpeter Ford.

I read my letter through, and answered for myself.

"Yes," I cried. "She says I may please myself, and I please to stay, if you would like it, Basil."

Basil's smile was enough for me, but not, it seemed, for Uncle Chayter.

"Where are your manners, sir?" he growled. "Is there any need to be a boor because you are a farmer?"

"I hope not, sir," said Basil, quietly; and indeed anything less like a boor could hardly have been

imagined. I wondered my uncle did not beg his pardon on the spot, but he only grunted, and looked sourly round the room.

"You call this a farm-house, do you?" he observed, and Mrs Fielding herself could hardly have been more scornful. But Basil would not take offence.

"Don't you think it's improved, uncle?" he asked. "It was Esther's idea to fill up that ugly three-cornered cupboard with the blue china, and I'm sure it's a great success."

"Jones kept his sample bags in it, and I take it that sample bags are more in a farmer's way than blue china," said Uncle Chayter, perversely.

"The sample bags are here all right," said Basil, opening one of the side-board drawers, and showing a business-like array of those useful commodities. But Uncle Chayter would not be beguiled into approval.

"Silver waiters! What next?" he ejaculated, looking at a modest little salver that adorned the plain oak side-board, flanked by an oak-and-silver flagon, and a biscuit-box of similar description. "I should have thought it a handy place for keeping your books. But perhaps," added my uncle, sarcastically, "you're too much of a farmer to keep accounts. It's a thing, I believe, they never do."

Basil looked at me and raised his eye-brows in comical resignation. Uncle Chayter was clearly determined to grumble, and it was better to let him have it out—that was what Basil's look said, as plainly as if he had spoken, and I quite agreed with him. I am bound to confess that my uncle fully availed himself of the tacit permission. The short-

comings of farmers and the follies of women were the theme of his discourse, and he enlarged on the fruitful subject till he fairly grumbled himself into good humour again. I was careful not to interrupt him, and as for Basil, I doubt if he even heard the splenetic tirade.

He stood by the window, looking out at the desolate waste of snow, and something in his expression reminded me of the white, weary face I had seen when I came so unexpectedly on his midnight musings. Whatever his thoughts were, they were not pleasant ones, I was sure, and I was more grateful than ever for the permission to stay with him.

"Well," said my uncle at last, getting up and shaking hands with us quite amiably, farmer and woman as we were, "I must be going now. The Earl wants to see me on business, and as Colonel Hazelford's here, of course I can guess what the business is. Yours won't be the only wedding this summer, Master Basil, and I only hope the Earl will insist on proper settlements for his ward."

"What relation is Miss Temple to the Earl?" I asked, as Basil did not speak.

"Upon my word, I don't know," said my uncle, after a moment's reflection. "It's very odd, but I really do *not* know—not even if the relationship is on my lord or my lady's side."

"Miss Temple is no relation to either," said Basil, without turning his head.

He was standing by the window still, but it seemed he was less absorbed in his own thoughts than I had supposed.

"Eh! How do you know? I always thought she was niece to one or the other."

"I know, because she told me herself," said Basil, briefly.

And then Uncle Chayter took himself away, and Basil went out with him, and stood at the gate looking after him as he trotted away over the soft, silent snow. How hushed and still everything was, I thought. How grey—almost black—the sky looked against the snow; how un-English and even Arctic it all was. And then I looked at Basil, and retracted my thoughts. The tall, straight, fair-haired figure in the rough tweed suit could be only English; no other nationality has ever produced just that union of strength and grace, of courtliness and freedom, of the townsman's culture and the countryman's naturalness and fearless ease. My brother! How proud I was of him. How ardently I longed to pierce the secret of his grief, and bring him such consolation as I could. That some trouble had come to him I no longer doubted. His face, seen thus in repose, was too sad to leave room for doubt. I felt quite guilty, watching him like this, when probably he believed himself alone, and I moved away from the window, wondering how long he would stand looking after Uncle Chayter in that aimless sort of way. Suddenly he turned and came into the house, and asked me if I would like to go for a walk.

"If you are not busy," I said, "I should like it very much."

"Busy? The snow stops everything. And beside—"

He put his hand to his head with a gesture of pain, but he did not finish the sentence. "Wrap yourself well up," he said, "the frost is the hardest I ever knew."

It was like him to be so thoughtful for me when I was sure his own head was aching—but was he not thoughtful for every one, this good brother of mine? Pretty May was the pet of the Rectory, but I thought that, when she was Basil's wife, she would scarcely miss the loving care she was accustomed to at home, as so many young brides do.

I could not help saying something of the sort to him as I thanked him now, but he did not respond to the remark, and once more I felt as if my sympathy had been repulsed.

It was rather a silent walk we had, but what a walk it was! Basil had suggested that we should go and look at the footprints in the park, and we turned in at the great gates, and up the broad drive where alone walking was possible. A way had been cut through the snow, and great white blocks were piled like a glittering wall on either hand. All around us the country was a vast sheet of white, and the trees a fairy fretwork of frosted branches. Near the horizon the sky looked black from contrast, but it cleared to a pale frosty blue in the zenith, while low in the south hung the wintry sun, shorn of his beams, and looking scarcely larger than a moon.

Basil said that the thermometer showed thirty degrees of frost, but we were not cold. The air was so absolutely still that it seemed to have a dreamy languor in it, like that of a summer's evening.

Altogether it was a sort of enchanted scene, and though I had come out to please Basil rather than myself, I felt well repaid.

Presently we turned the corner of the house, and came in sight of the side door, from which a line of footsteps was plainly visible in the snow, stretching away from the door to the dim white coppice hardly to be distinguished from the swell of the snow-covered park.

"How small they are, and how close together," I said, looking at them with a good deal of interest. Basil stooped down and measured one.

"Yes," he agreed. "It knocks the sweetheating theory on the head. It must have been a child."

"The figure I saw was too tall for a child; and besides, there are no children at the Castle," I objected; but Basil would not be convinced.

"I think you were too much frightened to be any judge of the 'ghost's' size," he said, with a laugh. "Fear always magnifies things, you know. It must have been a child, for no one else could leave a print so small. You have dainty enough feet, my dear, but put one of yours down by these and see."

I did as he desired, but though we Grahams pride ourselves on our small feet and hands, and my boot was only a "three," it certainly left a considerably larger impression. I came round to Basil's conclusion that the "ghost" must have been a child, but I felt very sorry to think that any child should have taken that midnight walk over the snow.

We were still talking about it, and wondering what child it could possibly have been, when the

side door opened, and Dr Cheriton, our Hazelford doctor, came down the path towards us.

Dr Cheriton had recently taken old Mr Price's practice, and Hazelford opinion was greatly divided about him. The men—what few there were—liked him, but the old ladies sighed for Mr Price as with a single voice. As for the young ladies, they were for once of one mind with the old. Dr Cheriton was not in any sense a ladies' man, and manifested an unpardonable indifference to the charms of the Hazelford belles. Nevertheless I liked his face. If it was plain, it was honest and shrewd, keen of glance and firm of lip, and with wonderful power in the broad rugged brow. As he came towards us now, he discovered also a very pleasant smile, and I found that during Lady Otterbourne's illness, he had developed quite an intimacy with Basil.

"Mr Ford was good enough to let me come and stay with him sometimes," he explained, and Basil added that there had been a night or two when Dr Cheriton had thought his patient in too critical a state to be left, and yet had not liked to alarm the Earl by staying at the Castle.

"But she is better now," said the doctor, cheerfully, "so much better that I have knocked her off the list. But, unless I am very much mistaken, I'm afraid I shall have another patient there before long," he added, with a shrewd little shake of the head.

"Another!" said Basil, quickly. "What do you mean?"

"*Who* do I mean would be more to the point," said Doctor Cheriton. "I mean Miss Temple. I don't like her looks. Her eyes are too bright."

"Too bright? Men don't often say that of a woman's eyes," I said, foolishly enough. But some instinct of covering Basil's silence made me rush into unconsidered speech.

"I'm not a man—I'm a doctor," said Dr Cheriton, and I felt as crushed as he could possibly have desired. "I mean," he went on, "that eyes are too bright when they are not in correspondence with the rest of the frame. Inert and languid movements and restless sparkling eyes show disturbed balance somewhere in the wonderful machinery we doctors try to keep in working order. Tinkers we are at best, you know, but even a tinker can see when a cog gets out of gear. Now Miss Temple's is a peculiar constitution——"

"Tinkers are never happy unless they're talking shop," said Basil, with an offence in his tone that seemed to me quite uncalled for. Decidedly he was not the easy-tempered Basil of three months ago—or perhaps he had expended all his patience on Uncle Chayter.

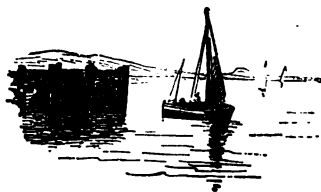
Dr Cheriton laughed.

"I believe it's true," he said, pleasantly, "and I ask Miss Graham's pardon. As some atonement, let me suggest that you go with me to see the skating on the lake. They have had men at work all the morning clearing off the snow, and it isn't often you get a chance in England of such ice as there is beneath. I'm going round myself to have a peep at it—which, alas! is all I shall have time for," ended the hard-working doctor with a sigh.

We went down to the lake together, Basil and the

doctor talking of the "ghost" I had fancied I saw last night, and of the footsteps that proved the fancy to be so easily accounted for. As for the footsteps themselves, Dr Cheriton agreed with Basil that they were probably a child's, though whose remained a mystery.

"It won't be a mystery long, I suspect," laughed the doctor. "Any reasonable child ought to be laid up with inflammation or bronchitis after a walk like that. Depend upon it, Miss Graham, I shall spot your ghost yet."





## CHAPTER X.

### FACES AND FANCIES.

“How much her grace is altered on the sudden !  
How long her face is drawn ! How pale she looks,  
And of an earthly cold ! Mark you her eyes.”

—*Shakespeare.*

THE lake was a sheet of ornamental water in the park, surrounded by trees, and of a depth too inconsiderable to alarm even the most timid of skaters. Yesterday it had been a plain of snow, indistinguishable from the rest of the park, but to-day it was clean swept, and the smooth ice showed darkly against the surrounding snow. A few skaters were already on it, and two or three groups were clustered at the edge, talking and looking on.

The Earl was there, and Uncle Chayter, and a gentleman whom I presumed to be Colonel Hazelford. They were talking together, and a little further off were Dr Bennet, the vicar of Coombe, and his two pretty daughters, Miss Temple, and a lady whom I had not seen before, but who seemed to be very much at home. I knew afterwards that she was Mrs Desborough, Colonel Hazelford's sister, and that a short, stout man who just then came on the ice was her husband. Mrs Desborough was very richly

dressed in sealskin and fur, and Miss Temple, as usual, was looking superb in a style entirely her own.

I knew that the Miss Bennets were considered some of the prettiest girls in the county, but their beauty seemed to pale beside Miss Temple's, even as May's had done. They were handsome and well dressed, but as Miss Temple stood talking to them they looked insignificant and dowdy. What was there in this girl's beauty, I wondered, that it should dwarf and subdue all other women's? Was it the features so much more clearly cut than is common in Englishwomen, or the mingled fire and softness of the dark, lustrous eyes, or only that the noble and rather exalted expression seemed to lift her to some plane above the thoughts and ways of lesser and more ordinary natures? As for her dress, a tight-fitting robe of blue velvet—unrelieved by any trimming but the silvery fur at throat and wrist—would have been trying to most women, but it seemed exactly to suit the regal beauty of Ellinor Dieudonné Temple.

I found myself thinking what a curious name it was, and unconsciously saying so half aloud. But Dr Cheriton had ears of abnormal acuteness.

"Yes," he agreed; "I had no idea she possessed anything so magnificently appropriate. The Countess always calls her Donnie.

"That is a pretty name too."

"But not half so suitable. What a splendid creature she is, to be sure! Quite a psychological study."

I wondered if the interest in his tone was purely professional, or if Miss Temple's extraordinary beauty had moved even this unsusceptible doctor from his

usual scientific indifference. He certainly seemed to follow all her movements with interest, and presently he went on to the ice, and joined the little group of which she was the centre. He stood talking to her a little while, and then I saw him kneel down and fasten on her skates.

"Of all things, a scientific medico is about the most insufferable!" said Basil, suddenly.

"I thought you liked him!" I exclaimed.

"He is well enough on his own ground," said Basil; "but men like that never seem to understand that anything on earth should be sacred from their impertinent tongues."

I listened in some astonishment, for indeed I did not see what the doctor had said to deserve such sweeping censure. However, Basil said no more; and indeed at that moment my uncle and the Earl came towards us. Uncle Chayter introduced me to the great man, and I was conscious of a foolish wonder to find him so much like other people. He asked us to join the skaters, but Basil excused himself, and I did not like to go without him.

"I thought you were so fond of skating, Basil," I said, when the Earl had rejoined his friends.

"I don't care to go amongst those people on sufferance."

"On sufferance? Oh, Basil! I'm sure nothing could have been nicer or more friendly than Lord Otterbourne was just now."

"The Earl? Oh, yes, he is friendly—he is a friend. But his friends are a different matter. I'm not going to put myself in the way of conventional insult."

I thought the fear morbid and quite unnecessary, but probably Basil knew best ; and indeed I could not but be struck by the difference between the Earl's manner, so simply friendly and unaffected, and the supercilious stare with which Colonel Hazelford favoured us as he skated by.

But, in spite of his rudeness, I could not look without interest at the man who was betrothed to Ellinor Dieudonnée Temple. He was a good-looking man, tall, and with a military bearing, but older than I had expected. His hair was light, and he wore a tawny moustache with long pointed ends. But though his figure was young, and neither hair nor moustache had more than a strand or two of grey in them, I felt I was not far out in putting him down on the wrong side of forty. There were lines about the pale grey eyes and round the corners of the mouth that youth never knows, and I found myself wondering how a man of his age could have won a young girl's love.

I looked from him to Miss Temple, almost as if I expected to find an answer in her face, and I was struck with the restlessness of her glance and the languor of her movements almost as much as Dr Cheriton had been. She was skating now, gliding gently over the smooth ice with scarcely perceptible effort, but with something in the feverish brightness of her eyes that seemed to contradict the impression of indolent grace the undulating movement gave. Colonel Hazelford kept close to her, speaking eagerly from time to time, and winning, it seemed to me, but brief and indifferent replies.

"She knows her power, and means him to know

it too," I thought. Yet I felt half ashamed the next minute.

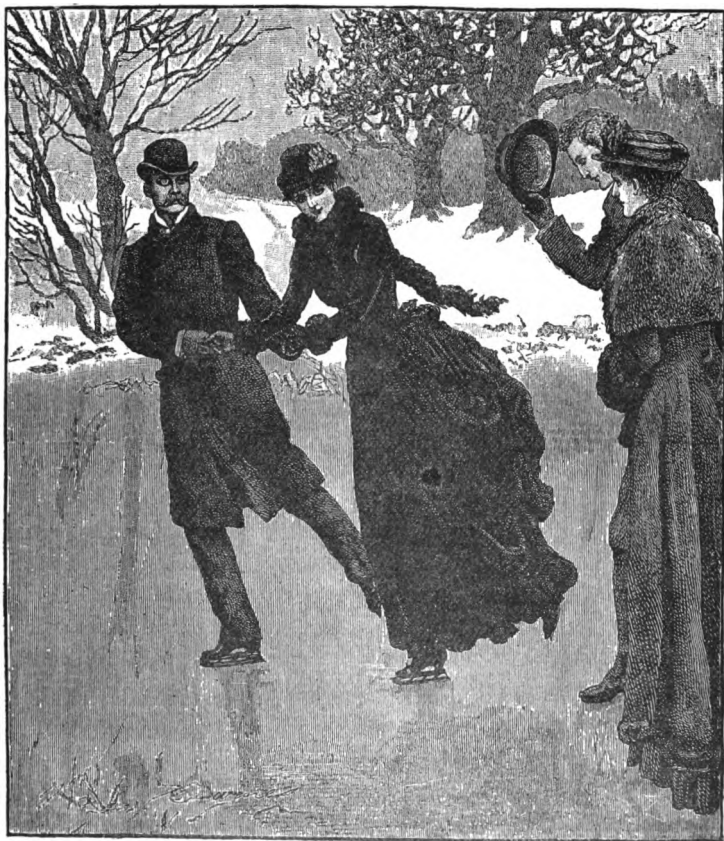
Their course round the lake had brought them to our side of it again, and as they passed, Miss Temple bowed to Basil with a courtesy that seemed all the more pointed for her companion's arrogant stare. What a sweet face it was, with the pride in it just tempered by a smile! How sweet and womanly she looked, and what a difference that sudden smile made. Haughty and indifferent till then, there was a shy grace in her salute that quite fascinated me. No, she was not a coquette, I told myself. A woman with a face like that could not be anything but noble and lofty and true.

It seemed a disappointment to every one, and I am sure it was to me, when Miss Temple left the ice, which she did a few minutes afterwards. I heard Colonel Hazelford remonstrating, and Mrs Desborough joining her entreaties to his, but without avail.

"I am tired," Miss Temple said, "and don't you think it is getting very cold?"

She shivered as she spoke, and I saw that her cheeks were pale and her lips bloodless. The restless eyes shone under their drooping lids with a sort of feverish light, and I thought of Dr Cheriton's prophecy, and wished his duties had not already taken him away. Miss Temple looked ill enough to need his services, I thought, as she went away on Colonel Hazelford's arm, but Basil did not agree with me.

"Ill?" he said, almost irritably. "I never saw her looking better in my life. What possesses you to



"AS THEY PASSED, MISS TEMPLE BOWED TO BASIL."—Page 108.



take such fancies in your head? But if you've had enough of this, I think we'll be going home. I can't afford to waste all the day."

Of course I said I was ready to go, though I had been enjoying myself too much to think the time long. There is always something interesting in watching people whom you do not know, but concerning whom you know a good deal, and my interest in Lord Otterbourne and his friends had prevented my feeling fatigue. I realised now, however, that my feet were cold and my fingers numb, and remembered that Basil had a headache, and that for him the "Castle people" had passed out of the region of speculative conjecture into actual acquaintance, and were probably no more interesting than the rest of the world. Even for me, Miss Temple's departure had very much reduced the interest, and I turned homewards willingly enough.

After our early dinner Basil went out again, but the brief glory of the January day was already over. The sky was cloudy, and a cold north wind was blowing.

I drew my chair to the fire, and sat down to the hemming of the fine damask table-cloths which were to be part of my mother's contribution to Basil's housekeeping. But the waning light soon forced me to desist, and I leaned back in my chair and looked idly out of the window, as next winter perhaps May would look out of it—May, who would be my brother Basil's wife.

I fancied I could see her—not May Fielding, but May Ford—with a certain change upon her butterfly

ways, a matronly dignity that Basil's wife could hardly fail to wear, and that would become her well.

Here in the dusk she would sit, as I was sitting now; waiting, as I was waiting now, for him; her girlish petulance stilled to a fulness of content, an abiding peace that, perhaps, only a good man's wife can know. Dusk as it would be, she would not light the lamp, for, perhaps, he might come up the garden-way and she would miss seeing him if she did. I could fancy her sitting by the firelight, just as I was sitting, leaning her ear to catch his earliest footfall, or lifting her head to see him coming in at the door. Mrs Fielding often sighed pathetically to think of "poor dear May buried alive in a lonely farm-house," but I could have laughed her pity to scorn. May need envy no one, I thought, when once she should be my brother Basil's wife. What loneliness could she know when he was her companion, and when even solitude would be only a happy waiting for his coming? Even to me the Home Farm was neither dull nor lonely; how much less then could it be either the one or the other to my brother Basil's wife?

How pleasant it was sitting here in the "darklings," with the firelight dancing on the raftered ceiling, and glinting on the salver that had given Uncle Chayter such offence. Outside it was quiet enough of course. There was nothing to be heard but the barking of the sheep-dog, and nothing to be seen but the white road glimmering in the fading light, and the white palings that looked quite dingy against it. Basil was out at the back, seeing no doubt to the diligence of his men and the comfort of his beast—Basil being

a man who believed in the master's eye—and passers-by were rare events at the Home Farm. It was all the more surprising to see Dr Cheriton's gig suddenly flash by—and, unless I was very much mistaken, Colonel Hazelford was sitting by his side.

Miss Temple must be ill! That was the only thing that Colonel Hazelford in the doctor's gig could mean. I listened to hear if they turned off the road into the park, but the snow muffled the wheels, and I heard nothing. By the time Mrs Munns appeared with the lamp I had fallen back to my old musings, and my thoughts had come home from Miss Temple to Basil and May.

It was less easy to imagine Basil in his married life, and the pictures I drew of him were less complete. The face I saw bent to his girl-wife's kiss was noble, and grave, and sweet, for it was Basil's; but the brow was shadowed, and I felt that if I could have seen the eyes they might have worn the look they wore when they met mine in this very room last night. I told myself that it was not fair to attribute to May's husband an expression that was probably only the result of weariness and waiting, or of some temporary trouble that would have passed away long before then; and then I lifted my eyes, and saw Basil coming in at the door, with a look that was only too much like the pictured face my fancy had created.

"Basil, how tired you look," I exclaimed; "do sit down and rest. Shall I take your coat into the hall?"

For I saw with surprise that he was still wearing the coat and leggings in which he had been making

the round of stable, and byre, and yard. Never before had I known fastidious Basil come into the sitting-room thus, and I thought it showed how tired he must be.

But Basil did not sit down.

"I only looked in just to tell you not to wait tea," he said, still standing in the door-way. "The Earl wanted those plans for the Coombe Cottages, and I thought I would take them down myself."

"To the Castle? Did you see Dr Cheriton go by a little while ago? I'm afraid some one must be ill."

"So am I," said Basil; "I will ask when I leave the plans."

"Won't you have some tea first?"

"No, no," he said, impatiently. "I can't wait—I must know."

He shut the door, and I rang for Mrs Munns and the tea-pot. I had no inclination to return to my musings over the fire. The spell was broken, and besides this, I felt that my thoughts might have out-leapt those quiet and peaceful channels. Something in Basil's face, in the disturbance and disquiet in his manner, had raised a vague disturbance in my breast. I shrank from investigating the cause of my own disquiet, from inquiring too curiously into the cause of his—and this, not that I despaired of finding an answer, but, that I feared I might find one too easily for my own peace of mind, and for his.



## CHAPTER XI.

### "CINDERELLA."

"'Tis with our judgments as our watches, none  
Go just alike, yet each believes his own."—*Pope.*

**W**AITING in happy anticipation and waiting in something very like doubt and anxiety are two entirely different things, as every one knows who has tried them, and by the time Basil returned I was thoroughly tired of my own society. I had kept the tea on the table, and it was fortunate I had, for Basil did not come alone. Dr Cheriton was with him, looking very tired, and evidently grateful for the cup of tea I offered him.

"Don't make any more for me," he protested, "I'd rather have it now, tannin and all, than wait another minute for the best you could make. I'm dead beat, Miss Graham, for once in my life."

He sat down in the easy chair I pulled forward, and ate and drank like the hungry man he turned out to be.

"I've had nothing since breakfast," he explained, "for I dawdled about that skating this morning till I'd no time for lunch, and just as I was sitting down

to dinner, Colonel Hazelford fetched me to see Miss Temple."

"Then it *is* Miss Temple who is ill?" I asked, and some impulse I could neither resist nor explain prompted me to look at Basil as I spoke. But Basil was sitting with his hand over his eyes, and did not even see me.

"Yes, it is Miss Temple," Dr Cheriton said, "and a pretty sharp attack she's got. Pneumonia—of one lung at least—and so sudden, too. She had no business to be out this morning! I thought there was mischief brewing, but I didn't think she was in for such a serious affair as this."

"Do you mean that there is danger?"

"There is no immediate danger in her condition, but I suspect we haven't seen the worst yet. She's in a very critical state, and no one can say which way it will go," said Dr Cheriton, passing his cup for the fifth time. "Come, Ford, I'm making all the running. I don't get butter and cream like this every night, you know—but you're eating nothing at all."

"I'm all right," said Basil, rousing himself, and lifting his cup. But his hand shook so much that he set it down untasted.

Dr Cheriton looked at him curiously.

"Hullo!" he cried, "what have you been doing to yourself? You're as white as a sheet—nerves unstrung, and all the rest of it. Did *you* see the ghost last night, or what is it?"

"Nothing," growled Basil; "I wish you would not be absurd."

"Absurd or not, I should like to know what's bowled you over like this. Let me feel your pulse."

"Not I," said Basil, with a laugh that did not sound quite natural to me, whatever it did to Dr Cheriton. "Get on with your tea, doctor. When I want you professionally, I'll let you know."

"But, Basil," I cried, "I am sure Dr Cheriton is right. You are not well—you have not been well all day."

Basil gave me a look that effectually stopped me, and Dr Cheriton, who probably caught the repressive glance, discreetly changed the subject.

"I saw Miss Fielding this morning," he observed. "You ought to get her over for some skating, Ford. I've no doubt you could get permission from the Earl."

"Miss Fielding does not skate," said Basil, with an air of settling the matter.

"But you could teach her," said the irrepressible doctor. "If I were engaged to a pretty girl like that, I should jump at the chance. You'd have the lake pretty well to yourselves, too, for there won't be much more skating for the Castle people, I'm afraid. Colonel Hazelford goes to-morrow, and it will be a good while before Miss Temple will wear her skates again."

"But will Colonel Hazelford go if Miss Temple is as ill as you seem to think?" I asked.

"What good could he do if he stayed?" said Dr Cheriton.

I did not think that that was quite the point, and I was sure that Basil muttered "Brute!" But whether the exclamation referred to lover or doctor I did not know.

Perhaps, after all, neither of them deserved it. Dr Cheriton, of course, looked at the question from a doctor's point of view; and Colonel Hazelford certainly looked like a man who would be intolerably in the way in a house with sickness in it. I said so now, and Dr Cheriton entirely agreed with me.

"I don't think it's from any want of proper feeling that he talks of going," he said. "He seems very fond of Miss Temple, and full of concern about her, though he's certainly not an emotional man."

"No," I agreed; "I call his face decidedly hard. I can't think where I've seen just that expression before, pleasant and repellent at once."

"I should call that a highly original expression," said Dr Cheriton, gravely. "In the course of a somewhat extensive acquaintance, I can't say that I've ever met with it myself."

"You may laugh," I retorted, "but it's quite true. He *is* pleasant looking, with a sort of surface pleasantness, and yet he repels in spite of it. One feels—or, at least, *I* feel—as if he was cold and selfish, if you could get at his real self."

"Dear me!" said Dr Cheriton, looking at me with mock apprehension. "I hope you don't detect any secret vice about me, Miss Graham? It's quite alarming to sit opposite such a keen-sighted young lady!"

"I don't pretend to be that," I said, "but I feel sure I'm right about Colonel Hazelford; and the odd part is that I'm sure I've seen a face just like his before—with just that pleasant smile, and those cold crafty eyes. Don't you know, Basil, that I told you so coming home?"

"Did you?" said Basil. "I did not remember. But you know, Esther, that you see a good many things that escape other people—from ghosts upwards, I daresay."

"The ghost was really something that could be seen," I protested, "and I still maintain that I have seen a face with just Colonel Hazelford's expression, though where, or when, I can't remember."

"He's a good-looking fellow in his way," said Dr Cheriton, "and wonderfully well preserved. Well, they'll make a handsome pair, if only my patient pulls through this all right, as I'm sure I hope she will. It's a queer attack altogether, coming on so suddenly, and with absolutely nothing to account for it—unless, indeed," cried the doctor, sitting up in his chair in great excitement—"unless, indeed, a wild idea that's just occurred to me should turn out to be right. You didn't measure those footprints in the snow, did you, Ford?"

"No; that is, I took no exact measurement. But what has that got to do with it?"

"Well," said Dr Cheriton, looking very knowing, "I happened to notice, when I was putting on Miss Temple's skates, what a very small foot she has—ridiculously so for a woman of her height, and I can't help wondering if *she* was Miss Graham's 'ghost.'"

"*Miss Temple!*" cried Basil. "You must be mad! Miss Temple rambling about the park at twelve o'clock at night—how can you dare to say, or even to think such a thing?"

Dr Cheriton laughed at Basil's indignant tone.

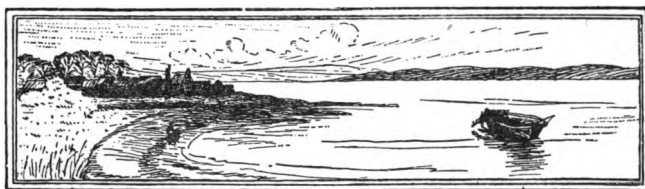
"Don't excite yourself, my good fellow," he said,

coolly. "I've as great a respect for Miss Temple as you can have, but queerer things than that have been done by girls every whit as nice. Perhaps it was just a girlish freak; or perhaps Colonel Hazelford was to meet her at the coppice, just to give a flavour of romance to their spooning. Miss Lydia Languish is not the first or the last young woman who has thought a humdrum engagement rather slow. Well——" as he became conscious of Basil's wrathful eyes, "I beg her pardon if I do her an injustice; but I'll ask her maid for a shoe, and compare it with the footprints all the same. You see it would account for everything—for the use of the private door, and for the discrepancy between Miss Graham's impression of the height of the figure she saw and the actual size of the footsteps. It would account for this illness, too; after a chill like that pneumonia would be the most natural thing in the world. But what did she go for? That's the weak point; and why did nobody know?"

Dr Cheriton stood frowning and biting his moustache, but neither of us attempted to answer. To me the idea seemed wild and preposterous, and if I read Basil's indignant face aright, he regarded it as absolute profanation.

Nevertheless when Dr Cheriton appeared the next night, he brought word that Miss Temple's illness was assuming a still more serious form, and added gravely enough—

"And no wonder, for her shoe fits those footprints as exactly as Cinderella's foot fitted the glass slipper."



## CHAPTER XII.

### WAITING FOR THE VERDICT.

“For sure the greatest evil man can know,  
Bears no proportion to this dread suspense.”—*Froude.*

**T**IME went slowly in that last week of my visit at the Home Farm. The weather was bad, with cold, drizzling rain overhead, and all the miseries of melting snow underfoot. The frost had gone, but a harsh north-west wind was blowing, and the change from the stillness and sunshine made the thaw seem the colder of the two. Of course we were not in the evil case of dwellers in cities when a thaw sets in. It was not pleasant to have to walk over sloppy fields, and roads where there were more puddles than stepping-places; but, as I said to Basil when he grumbled at the slush he had to wade through, “At least it was clean dirt.”

If the snow had lost its virgin whiteness, it was only where the rain had pitted it, or the grass had forced its way through. To the last it was beautiful, and the shady corners where it lingered were white as ever still.

I had rejoiced in the first symptoms of a thaw on Miss Temple's account, but Dr Cheriton told me

that a thaw like this was worse than the frost itself. We saw him very often in the first week of Miss Temple's illness. Double pneumonia—whatever that might mean—had set in, and I could see that Dr Cheriton was very anxious about his patient. He went to the Castle three or four times a day, and generally came in to tea or supper with us. It was "rest and much needed refreshment" to the hard-worked doctor, as he told us with a heartfelt gratitude that seemed almost incongruous in a man of his character; and to us it was a relief from the monotony of the day, and a certainty of reliable information instead of the vague and exaggerated reports that reached us from other sources. I was always glad when the doctor's gig stopped at the gate, for indeed I was interested in Miss Temple on my own account. How could I not be interested in the beautiful, gracious creature who, only a week ago, had been looking forward to her marriage with the man of her choice, and whose life seemed now to hang on so frail a thread? There were elements of pity, and even of tragedy in the contrast, and I always felt my pulse quicken as I waited for Dr Cheriton's report, while Basil stood by with a dumb questioning in his eyes beside which my own anxiety seemed trivial curiosity indeed.

Oh, Basil, my brother! how my heart ached for you in those sad days! How I longed to utter the words of sympathy that yet I dared not speak. I could not—I did not—attempt to deceive myself any longer. Basil's restless misery and uncontrollable anxiety told me only too plainly what his secret was.

He was May Fielding's betrothed, but it was not May he loved—it was this other girl, so far above him in station, and herself betrothed; this girl with the beautiful face and the lustrous eyes, whose life was hanging in the balance now, and who, even if she lived, could never be his wife.

It was not wonderful that he went about his work like a man in a dream; that he sat opposite to me at meals with wide unseeing eyes, like one whose senses were numbed and dazed with pain; that he brooded over the hearth at night as if he were unconscious of my presence, and only roused himself when Dr Cheriton came in, to turn upon him a gaze that seemed as if it would have wrung from him by its own intensity the tidings for which Basil could not, or would not ask.

They were graver every day, and as the week drew to its close, even Dr Cheriton, persistently hopeful as he had been, was obliged to own that there was little hope left. Two London doctors had been called in, but their opinion had been unfavourable from the first. They had both gone back to town, declaring that nothing more could be done, and though our brave little doctor said that so long as breath remained he would not give up the fight, I could see that he felt it a forlorn hope at best.

"To-night will probably decide it," he said, as he got up from tea on the evening of the seventh day. "I'm not a believer in *crisis*, in the usual acceptance of the word, but unless a critical change takes place in the next few hours, I'm afraid her strength won't hold out."

I dared not look at Basil. I seemed to know and feel all that he must be feeling without that.

"Well, I must lose no time in getting back," Dr Cheriton went on. "The Earl would like me there all day, but it's true enough there's nothing to be done. If ever there was a case for expectant treatment, it is this."

"What is expectant treatment?" I asked.

Basil had got himself out of the room on the pretext of ordering the doctor's gig—his horse was always taken out and rubbed down and fed while its master had his tea—and Dr Cheriton had not as usual accompanied him.

"Expectant treatment? Oh, it's just folding our hands and letting nature do the work we can't. It's what most doctoring amounts to, but sometimes we've the sense not to interfere. But Miss Graham, I stayed behind to say something—to ask you——"

He broke off, looking quite embarrassed, and I wondered what he could possibly have to say that should cause him any difficulty. I am certainly not a formidable person, and Dr Cheriton was generally glib enough of speech.

"I daresay you'll think it's no business of mine," he went on at last, "or perhaps," with a short scornful laugh, "perhaps you'll think I'm touting. But can't you see for yourself that Ford ought to have advice?"

The tears rushed to my eyes. I knew it so well—as well as I knew how useless any advice of the sort he meant would be.

"Not mine, you know," cried the doctor, frowning quite savagely, but looking at me with an honest

anxiety I could not but like him for. "You know me, I hope, too well to think I mean that! But can't you get him to see some one? A man doesn't look as he does unless he's either ill or unhappy, and, in Ford's present circumstances, there can't be much doubt which it is. I thought he was out of sorts before you came, but this week he's been looking ghastly."

"Oh, I know," I said, sorrowfully. "But what can I do? I wish he would see you."

"I wish you would leave me out of it altogether! Tell him you're concerned about him, and get him to see some one in town. You could do that, couldn't you?"

I shook my head, for Basil was coming in at the door.

"Try!" said Dr Cheriton, emphatically. "I'll come in again and let you know how Miss Temple is," he said in a louder tone, and with a matter-of-fact manner.

But as he went out of the room he looked at me significantly, and I saw his lips silently form the word—"Try."

I wished he would have tried himself, but I knew that was a hopeless wish. Dr Cheriton, with his back up on a point of professional etiquette, would be the stubbornest of men.

"Pig-headed man! he would stand superciliously by and see Basil *die* before his eyes unless he was properly 'called in!'" I told myself with great irritation, and, I own, with great injustice. He was not standing by, either superciliously or otherwise,

but doing his best to see that help was provided—so long as it was none of his.

I looked at Basil, and felt that he was right. Whatever the cause—and I thought I knew it all too well—my brother was ill. Zoophytes and fungous germs are not the only disturbing forces in the human economy. So long as body and soul are linked together, so long will sorrow and anxiety, perplexity and remorse, count as not less powerful factors; and could I doubt that Basil was suffering from each and all of these? What bitter grief, what anguish of anxiety, a man who loved Ellinor Dieu-donnée Temple must have endured in the week that had just gone over our heads! What agonies of perplexity and remorse must not May Fielding's betrothed be feeling, who could suffer thus for another woman's peril!

Basil had got out his violin, and was tuning it with all the absorption in the process that musicians affect, but Dr Cheriton's parting glance nerved me to interrupt him.

"Are you going up to town on Monday?" I asked, the happy thought occurring to me that the Farmers' Club would hold one of its meetings then.

"No; I can't leave," said Basil, without looking up.

"I thought you always liked to be at the February meeting?"

"I can't go this year. I couldn't, till——"

Trying a string was a fair excuse for not finishing the sentence; but I could supply the conclusion only too well.

"I wish you would," I persisted. "Do you think

I don't see that you are not well—that you are not happy, Basil? And do you think I don't, at least, guess why?”

“Is that why you want me to go to the club, and enjoy the soothing effect of a discussion on railway tariffs, or bi-metallism, or the amount of loss in silage cured without a silo?” asked Basil, bitterly, as he screwed up a string with such energy that it snapped in two.

“No, you know it isn't. But if you went up to town, you might see a doctor there. You look ill—you *are* ill, Basil; and indeed I should be so much happier if you would.”

“Don't be a goose!” was all that Basil condescended to reply.

And then he took his violin and fitted a new string to it, and played as I had never heard him play before. I could not see his face, for he sat back in the shadow of the great chimney-piece, and the shade on the lamp concentrated its light on the table where I sat at work; but, as I listened, I could have wept, unmusical as I am. No other playing had ever moved me like Basil's; but *this*—it was like looking into the depths of his troubled heart—like reading a story of love and conflict, of passion and pain, that I knew could be only his own.

It does not need an acquaintance with the laws of counterpoint, or the subtleties of harmony, to feel when a master's voice speaks. The language may be strange to us, but Nature's tones are the same in every tongue. There are strains, as there are books, in which the artist's soul makes its passionate

appeal for sympathy, and will not be denied. As I sat and listened, I could contain myself no longer. I went to him and knelt beside him, and laid my head upon his shoulder, and wept as if my heart would break.

"Oh, Basil, Basil!" I cried, "I can't bear it—I can't indeed."

Basil put down his violin, and I felt his arm round me, and his hand upon my hair, but he did not speak.

"She is young, she is strong—she may get better yet," I sobbed. "Dr Cheriton does not give up hope, whatever the other doctors do."

"Do *you* care so much?" he said, smoothing my hair affectionately. "You hardly know her, and yet you weep like this. Is it any wonder——"

He broke off, and then he said, in a tone that renewed all my grief—

"But there is no harm in your tears—they wrong no one. In *your* grief is neither reproach nor shame."

"Oh, Basil, don't talk like that!" I entreated. "You could not help it—you would have been true to May, if you could, I know."

Something very like a sob stirred my brother's breast. Then he got up, and put me away from him a little sternly.

"'Could not help it,'" he repeated. "That is a woman's excuse—or a child's. Is a man to say he 'cannot help' doing wrong? I must, and I will help it—if only that I may pray for her with unperjured lips."

He went away, and left me kneeling by the chair, and I bent my head on my hands, and prayed with all my heart both for him and for her.

Basil did not come back again, not even when Dr

Cheriton's gig stopped at the door. But when I ran into the hall to meet him and hear his news—as in my eagerness I could not refrain from doing—I heard Basil's door open overhead, and I knew mine would not be the only ears the doctor's report would reach.

"I haven't a minute to spare, but I thought you'd like to know," he cried, seizing both my hands, and almost shaking them off. "The pulse is only 100, and the temperature half a degree above normal!"

"But what does that mean?" I asked, for I thought this vehement agitation might have been either joy or grief.

"It means *life*, Miss Graham, life instead of death," said Dr Cheriton.

"Thank God!" I said from my heart. For indeed I felt that Miss Temple's life was not the only one that had hung trembling in the balance, nor hers the only one for which thanks were due.

I did not see Basil again that night, and when I came down in the morning, he made no reference to what, I am sure, was uppermost in both our minds. For me, I was too shy, and too afraid of wounding or offending him to allude to the subject again, and, indeed, Miss Temple's name was not mentioned by either of us till once more my leave of absence had expired, and the last night had come.

Every one knows how potent the spell of the last night is, how it thaws reserve and draws out confidences. I felt that if ever Basil was to speak at all it would be to-night, and I was not disappointed.

He held my hand as I wished him good-night, and looked down on me with a grave and tender smile.

"Good-night," he said, as he kissed my brow; "good-night, dearest and best of sisters. How good you have been to me! How little I can ever repay you! I wish there were anything I could do for you, I wonder if there is?"

"Be happy, Basil," I answered. "I want nothing else—nothing but to see you *that*."

"Do you think any one ever won happiness by trying for it, Esther? Suppose we leave that question to take care of itself. I will try—I *am* trying—to do right, and the other does not matter, after all."

"It matters to me," I said, stoutly. "But if you do right, Basil, will it not come?"

"We will hope so—some day—though not as you mean it, my dear. It is best that I should face the truth, I think, and learn to do without it."

I bent my head, lest he should see the tears I could not keep back. But I think he guessed how much I sorrowed for him.

"Don't," he said, gently. "If you were not so sorry for me, you would be the first to remind me that there are higher things than happiness. I have made up my mind not to think about it, only just to try to do right."

"To May?" I ventured to whisper.

"Certainly. That is what I meant."

"But, Basil——" I hesitated, and then went on desperately—"I don't quite understand. Do you mind telling me what you mean? Are you going to break off your engagement?"

"Most certainly not. What do you take me for? Did I not tell you that I intend to try and do right?"

"But it seems to me," I said, firmly, "that the really right and honourable thing would be to break it off. You do not love May now, whatever you did once—and—and there is Miss Temple, you know," I ended, lamely.

Basil did not speak for a moment. Then he said, in a voice that was low with pain—

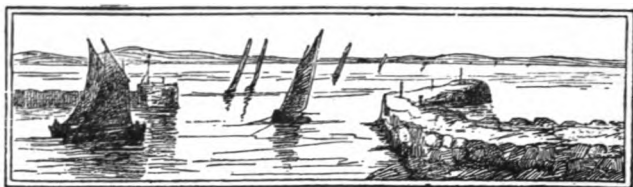
"I do not think I need consider that. Miss Temple, even if she were free, is too utterly above me to affect the question. She will pass out of my life soon, and I shall learn to forget her. I need not sacrifice May's happiness because I have allowed myself to indulge in vain imaginings and impossible dreams."

I did not agree with him. How could I, knowing him as I did, and realising the strength and depth of his love, perhaps even more fully than he did himself? But I understood also that his mind was made up, and that it would be useless for me to try to alter it.

"Shall you tell May?"

"No, it would only pain her. And she would not understand. It has been a madness—a dream—but it is over now. Forget it, Esther, and remember only that your sympathy has helped me more than anything else in the world."

So I went back home, with the remembrance of much that had been trying and painful in my visit, of much that it wrung my heart even to think of, but with this little flower of Basil's thanks folded away in my inmost heart to sweeten and perfume all the rest.



## CHAPTER XIII.

### BOUND IN SHALLOWS.

“The sober comfort, all the peace which springs  
From the large aggregates of little things;  
On these small cares of daughter, wife, or friend,  
The almost sacred joys of home depend.”—*Hannah More.*

**B**ASIL drove me home himself, on a lovely February afternoon when everything seemed to breathe of life and hope, to tell of new possibilities, to whisper of returning spring. The snow had nearly all disappeared, though there were white patches still in the hollows of the downs; but there was something in the sunshine, in the soft south-west wind that blew gently in our faces, in the colour of the sky and sea, in the green of the fields, to tell us, that winter was overpast and spring was already at hand.

“If the ‘winter of our discontent’ might only pass in such manner, and with the promise of as fair a spring beyond!” I thought, with a glance at Basil’s face—the face that was so much too grave for his years, and that bore, at least to my eyes, such unmistakable traces of all he had so lately gone through. Yet there was something in it even now that comforted me. It was not the stormy and troubled face I had

looked at as we drove through the snow to the Home Farm a month ago, and I found in the calm, grave regard a presage of peace. I understood that in the conflict he had been through he had not been utterly worsted; that though victory might yet be far away, it was not a defeated man who sat beside me, perhaps not even one for whom I need fear defeat. The strong, brave soul, with his loyal simple purpose "to do right," must, with God's help, be victorious at last. I felt it, I knew it, and yet I looked at field and down and far-off sea, through a sudden mist of tears; there are some victories that cost as much as defeat, some laurel crowns that are not to be distinguished from the martyr's palm.

I wished I could have stayed with him, but I knew it was impossible. My mother's health was never good, and I was indispensable at home. She had made an effort in sparing me for so long that I knew she would scarcely have made for any one but Basil; but he felt, no less than I, that we could not ask for more.

It seemed strange to be at home again—to plunge suddenly from tragedies, the key-notes of which were love and death, into the trivial household interests that are the natural atmosphere of ordinary life. The change was so abrupt as to be quite bewildering, and I am afraid I hardly showed a proper interest in Charlie's retailment of Hazelford news, and my mother's inquiries as to the state of Basil's wardrobe.

Basil himself was ungrateful enough to shew still less. "Settle it with Esther," he said, taking his hat. "I am going to the Rectory, but whatever you decide

will be right for me." He went out and my mother turned to me.

"May is knitting him some new socks," she said, "but I thought perhaps one or two of the set he has now would want refooting before the winter was over?" My mother looked at me inquiringly, but I had no opinion to offer, and Charlie struck in—

"Old Jay is cut out, Esther. We've got ever such a bigger bass at the singing class now, and Jay is in such a wax he'd tear his hair, if there was any to tear."

"Certainly there isn't much," I admitted; "who is the new bass?"

"His name is the Honourable Fitz-Jocelyn Marmaduke Potts, but as no one but Mrs Fielding will tackle a name like that, he's generally known as the Honourable Fitz. He's a nephew of Miss Potts at the Myrtles."

"And how is May?"

"May's rather Fitz-struck too," said Charlie, coolly; "the Fieldings are all like that, you know. Even the baby struts when Fritz is there, and calls all her dolls Honourables. Mrs Nickleby's nothing to the gentility of Hazelford Rectory since that young man arrived, I assure you. I hope Basil will take him down a peg or two, if he sees him this afternoon."

Basil came back to tea, and brought May with him, and as we sat round the table in the familiar room, I could have fancied that the Home Farm, and all that had happened there, was a disturbed dream. How pleasant and familiar it all was! How glad my mother and Charlie were to have me back! Even May kissed me with effusion, and told me she had

missed me terribly. They were all very kind and glad, but perhaps the thing I liked best was the way Basil looked at May and said "he could well believe that."

May was in high spirits, the purely tinted cheeks flushed with the shell-pink that so enhanced her beauty, and the blue eyes sparkling like a child's with excitement and pleasure. May was one of those happy people whose sentiments are always in accordance with the occasion, whose moods are always exactly what they ought to be. I had sometimes been almost provoked with the lachrymose airs she assumed when Basil went away, and the gentle melancholy she indulged in during his absence—a melancholy that never interfered with her attention to her toilet, or even with her enjoyment of a novel, or her appetite for dinner—and now that her lover had returned, she was all smiles and bewitching welcome, and Basil would have been more than human if he had not been flattered at the sight.

Yet as I looked at them together, I did not think "flattered" was exactly the word. May's delight seemed to wake in him no mere self-complacency, but a great tenderness, and a sort of remorseful wonder. It seemed as if he could not do enough to show her, by every delicate attention in his power, how deeply he valued her regard, how loyal and true to her—for so I read his manner—he had resolved to be. He had always been *preux chevalier* in his bearing to her, but pretty May looked as if she hardly knew what to make of this additional homage.

"Isn't old Basil going it?" Charlie whispered to

me. "He's on the high horse to-night and no mistake, and May looks as if she'd rather have him safe on *terra firma*. That little girl will get a crick in the neck if Basil expects her always to strain up to his present altitude."

"I think anything would be better than that Basil's level should be lowered to suit other people's," I said, decidedly; but Charlie only laughed.

"You and he are always on the stilts, but it isn't every one can prance about like that. May's twice as jolly when she doesn't try. I suppose," said Charlie, confidentially, "he catches that big bow-wow style at the Castle? Uncle Chayter says he's always there."

"He was very little there while I was with him, I assure you."

"You must have had a precious dull time," commented Charlie. "Aren't you awfully glad to get home?"

"I know that I'm awfully sorry to lose her," said Basil, who seemed to have caught the end—I hoped it *was* only the end—of our discourse. "I shall try and persuade mamma to come to me herself for Easter, and then you and Esther could come too. I wish you would entertain the idea," he went on, looking at my mother; "it would be something to live on in my solitude."

"It is too far off for planning yet," said my mother. "We will see when the time comes."

"We have been making plans for things further off still," said Basil, with a look at May that deepened the pink cheeks to sudden carmine. "I have told

May I will wait no longer than the end of June. A farmer's bride must come to him between the hay and the harvest if she wants a honeymoon."

"I wish you wouldn't call yourself a farmer," said May, petulantly.

"What else am I?"

"Lord Otterbourne's Agent sounds a great deal better. Mr Potts was quite shocked to hear I was engaged to a farmer, till he heard who you really were," stammered May, but I think she had the grace to be ashamed of herself as she met Basil's eye.

"Who is Mr Potts?" he asked, gently enough; and then, when he had heard—"Do you think his opinion need matter to you, or to me?" He spoke very quietly, but May burst out crying before us all.

"If you're going to be cross, I shall—wish—I had not—come," she sobbed, and I did not know whether to smile or sigh at Basil's utter astonishment. Whether Miss Temple had ever crossed his path or not, I felt sure, as I had always done, that his engagement to May Fielding was a mistake.

"If he had only broken it off!" I thought, bitterly, A disappointed love seemed to me so much less an evil than a loveless marriage. But as Basil soothed pretty, spoilt May into good humour again, I knew that breaking off his engagement was the last thing in his thoughts.

To do May justice, his task was not a difficult one. She was soon all prettiness and smiles, and drove off with Basil, who was to take her back to the Rectory before setting out on his homeward drive, as

if her gaiety had never suffered that strange, brief eclipse.

"I hope Basil won't be harsh to her," said my mother. "Pretty little thing, she looked quite frightened when he asked about Mr Potts."

"I'm sure Basil was only too good to her," I exclaimed.

"Oh, I know he was very nice to-night, but May is so nervous and so easily frightened," said my mother, who shared the common conviction that a woman with blue eyes and a gift for tears is a creature to be caressed without much reference to the merits of the case. "May is so easily upset," she went on; "and nice as dear Basil is, I always feel he has it in him to be stern."

"And a good thing too!" cried Bertie. "I've no patience with May, and if I were Basil I'd have it out with old Potts! I knew he was pretty thick at the Rectory, but I didn't think it had come to his giving his opinion on May's engagement. Farmer or not, Basil's worth a dozen of the Honourable Fitz, and so May ought to think."

"And so May does think, I've no doubt," I said, soberly, for I felt it a sort of duty to defend Basil's betrothed in his absence. "She was excited and upset, and I daresay a good deal ashamed of herself."

"So she ought to be," growled Charlie.

"And if Basil isn't angry with her, I don't think we need to be," I ended, conclusively.

"Any man who cared for her *would* be angry," said Charlie; and it was so true that I had not another word to say.

But happily my brother's inference was not likely to be the same as mine.

I comforted myself by remembering how earnestly Basil was trying to do right, and though I thought his view of his duty a mistaken one, I could not doubt that all would yet be overruled for good.

In the weeks that followed—weeks in which the thought of Basil alone with his sorrow was almost more than I could bear—this was my consolation, this, and the knowledge that in the solitude to which he had returned he would no longer be harassed by anxiety on Miss Temple's behalf. The torture of suspense was over, and she was already convalescent.

"She is weak still, of course, but she is practically well, and only waiting for warm weather to go out," said Dr Cheriton, of whom I saw almost as much as when I was at the Home Farm. He was attending my mother for a slight attack of the Indian ague, from which she generally suffered in the spring, and we had all got to like the clever conversational doctor very much indeed. He was well read in things outside his profession—as most men are who make their mark in it—and could talk of Indian matters to my mother, with a distinct appreciation of the geographical positions of the three Presidencies, and not more confusion as to the relative positions of the Punjaub and Scinde than is to be expected in a well-educated Englishman.

He asked me once if I had persuaded Basil to seek medical advice, and consoled me for my failure by remarking that he hardly seemed to need it now.

"No," I agreed. "He is much better—so much

better that I am sure you need not trouble in any way about him."

I was not anxious to have those keen brown eyes directed to Basil with ever such innocent inquiry. How could I tell how much of my brother's secret their penetrating gaze might not divine? They were the brightest and keenest eyes I ever saw, and their sparkling intelligence was the redeeming point in the doctor's dark and rugged face. Whatever intelligence and skill could do, Dr Cheriton's patients might be sure of, and I think we all felt that my mother was likely to get over her ague sooner than in the days of Dr Price.

But in this our hopes were disappointed. My mother indeed professed herself wonderfully relieved by the medicines, but though she called herself almost well, Dr Cheriton's visits continued, and when a month had gone by I began to feel very uneasy. I had seen how scrupulous and punctilious he was in Basil's case, and I felt sure a man like that would not come so regularly and so long without grave occasion.

So one day I waylaid him as he was going out, and begged him to tell me if anything serious was the matter.

"I know doctors sometimes keep things back, but it would be mistaken kindness not to tell me," I pleaded. "I would so much rather know the worst——" And then I stopped, for, indeed, I could not go on.

"The worst? My dear Miss Graham," cried Dr Cheriton, "what have you been fancying or imagin-

ing? What can I have said to give you such an idea? Mrs Graham seriously ill! Nothing of the kind, I assure you. Except for this little touch of ague—a nothing, a mere nothing!”—insisted this incomprehensible doctor, eagerly—“she is absolutely well.”

“And yet you——” I began. But how could I tell him to his face that his own frequent visits had caused my fears? I blushed crimson, and stood silent, feeling as guilty as if I had been detected in a crime.

“I assure you, you have no cause to be uneasy,” repeated Dr Cheriton, “but I will look in again this evening, if it will be any satisfaction. As a friend, you understand—purely as a friend—for I give you my word of honour there is nothing in Mrs Graham’s health to give you the least uneasiness.”

He shook my hand with reassuring energy, and took his leave; but the door had hardly closed on him, when Charlie, who had been an unperceived auditor of our conference, started up from the sofa, and burst into a roar of laughter.

“Oh, this beats everything!” he declared. “I wouldn’t have missed it for twenty pounds. You are six years my senior, my venerable sister, but your innocence is certainly unsurpassed. I wonder you didn’t ask his intentions at once.”

“His intentions?” I ejaculated, in utter astonishment.

“They are tolerably patent to every one but the object of them,” said Charlie, coolly. “I should think you’re the only person in the house who thinks the Mater’s illness is anything but an excuse.”

But though my young brother was allowed a good deal of license, and took a good deal more than was allowed, I thought this was exceeding the limits accorded even to privileged Charlie.

"I thought you knew I considered jests like that in the worst possible taste," I said severely; and then I swept out of the room with as much dignity as I could assume. But I fear, from the smothered chuckles that pursued my retreat, that the retort was not as crushing as I intended.

Of course I did not believe Charlie's insinuations, but that any one should believe them was sufficiently annoying; and now that my eyes were opened, I could see a conscious smirk on our parlour-maid's demure round face as she announced "Dr Cheriton," while even my mother discovered a disposition to look in my direction when that too frequent announcement was made.

It was all very absurd, and I was very glad when my mother professed herself so well that he had no excuse for coming, even "as a friend." Charlie indeed declared that it would not be long before he found one, but I had got over my ill-humour before this, and only laughed at the foolish little jest.

We did not see much of Basil. He was naturally very busy as the spring came on, and when he came into Hazelford, he was more at the Rectory than at home. It was right that it should be so, I knew, but the knowledge scarcely sweetened the fact that his visits to us were short and few. I longed to see more of him, to know more of the inner life into which I had been privileged to look, and which I could now

only dimly guess at. I never saw him alone, and the things I longed to know were not such as could be even hinted at before others. Was he finding peace in the path of duty he was treading so steadily? Was he regaining in May's society the early glamour of his boyish love? Above all, had he seen Miss Temple, and had the meeting been a source of strength or of weakness? These were the questions I longed to ask, and though a secret consciousness assured me I should never have found courage to utter them had we been ever so much alone, I chafed at the presence of others as if that alone had sealed my lips. I might more reasonably have been grateful for it, for Charlie often blurted out questions I should have feared to ask.

He chaffed Basil about his visits to the Rectory, and inquired if they received the important sanction of the critical Fitz-Jocelyn Marmaduke Potts, and if he often met that elegant and superfine young man.

"For he's always there," averred Charlie, "and if he detects the farmer under 'Lord Otterbourne's Agent,' you'll have a rough time of it, I'm afraid."

"He doesn't seem a bad fellow," said Basil, with the large tolerance of a large contempt. "You can't take offence at a man who's too foolish to know when he's offensive."

"Oh, that's your line, is it?" said Charlie, with envious admiration. "He *is* a precious ass, to be sure, but *I* couldn't come the magnificent like you do. I should like to see you take him down!"

"I don't. I don't trouble my head about him.

He isn't often there when I am, or if he is, he generally goes away."

"I've no doubt he does—with his tail between his legs! I should think his notions of farmers are undergoing some curious modifications. I only wish he had known you before you got the agency—he'll put it all down to that."

"All what?" said Basil, laughing.

"Oh, the manners that maketh man, and all that sort of thing. He'll put you in his next lecture on the Effect of Culture on the Lower Orders, as a notable instance of the result of associating with your betters. By the way, Basil, have you been at the Castle lately? You never say anything about it now."

"I dined there last night."

"And did you see Miss Temple? I suppose she's quite well again?"

How easy it is to ask questions when the answer is a matter of entire indifference to us. I was dying to make the same inquiry, and finding it quite impossible to do so, and Charlie did it as casually as if he had been asking Basil's opinion about the weather.

"Miss Temple is better. I saw her last night for a little while," said Basil, quietly. And anxious as I was I could glean nothing from his tone as to how the meeting had affected him. I could only wait for Easter to judge for myself. My mother was inclined to accept Basil's invitation, and projected a family migration to the Home Farm, and I looked forward to seeing Basil then, and learning more about him

than I could in his hurried visits home. I must wait till Easter, I thought, but as it turned out, events were marching quicker than I knew.

Charlie came down to breakfast one morning with eyes swollen to the size of bantam's eggs, a flushed face, and what he was pleased to term "a beastly cold," but which Dr Cheriton pronounced to be a sharp attack of measles. I had never had the complaint, and my mother insisted on my leaving her to nurse Charlie, and going myself to the Home Farm, where I arrived within an hour, to Basil's great astonishment, and, as he kindly said, not less to his delight.

"I'm quite grateful to Charlie," he said, with a comical smile. "And I've no doubt Dr Cheriton was too. But whether he'll approve of the present arrangement as much as I do——"

"Oh, Basil," I cried, "are you going to be silly too?"

"Really, I don't know," said Basil, with mock simplicity. "I thought I'd made rather an acute remark, but I daresay time will show."



## CHAPTER XIV.

### PRIMROSGING.

“’Tis a morning pure and sweet,  
And the light and shadow fleet ;  
She is walking in the meadow,  
And the woodland echo rings ;  
In a moment we shall meet.”—*Tennyson*.

**S**PRING came that year with laggard footsteps, and except that the days were longer and the snow was gone, there seemed little change at the Home Farm since I was there before. The cosy, lamp-lit evenings had to yield to the cold light of sunless skies, but outside a chill east wind seemed to blight the promise of slowly greening hedge-rows and tardy, shivering flowers.

But at last, quite suddenly, all was changed. The wind veered to all quarters, and settled in the south ; the sky cleared to a soft serene blue ; in two days the hedges were green, and primroses were peeping on the banks. The larches shook out their crimson tassels, the lambs skipped in the meadows, the birds twittered and sang, and the cuckoo’s call was heard. It was a day to bring health to the sick and hope to the sad, to fill every heart with wonder and thanks-

giving, to tempt every foot abroad. I felt a restlessness I could not overcome, a craving for the sunshine, for the smell of the earth, and the breath of the wind, and the sight of the sweet spring flowers. I could not settle to my work ; I was driven out into the open air, as poets are urged into song, as painters fly to their easels, and musicians wake their instruments to life. If there be a name for this delicious unrest, I do not know it—but who has not felt it in the early days of spring ?

Whatever it was, it was too strong to be resisted. I folded up my work, and sallied out like a child released from school. For to-day I would be a child and take holiday like one; and by way of a beginning I stopped at the dairy door to ask Mrs Munns for some curds and cream, and ate them standing in the cool, dark place, and watching the sunlight quivering on the wet flags outside, where Mrs Munns was busy with pail and bucket, clattering about on a pair of pattens that clicked with every step.

I could see into the yard beyond, where all seemed suggestive of plenty and prosperity and peace. The barns were massive and well filled, whatever their contents might fetch ; the great ricks showed golden in the sun, whatever the price of corn. I stood and gazed in full enjoyment of the scene, and wondered how men could crowd into cities when they might see sights like these. I wished I had my sketch-book to sketch it all in, the red-tiled barns and sunny ricks, and all the picturesque life and colour of a well-kept farm-yard. There was a pond in the foreground, with ducks whose necks reminded me of the "livelier iris"

on Tennyson's "burnished dove," and a great white cart-horse drinking, and callow ducklings like balls of yellow down. Further on a young Devon bull showed his straight red back and short, dangerous-looking head, and some cows moved lazily, flicking the flies with slowly swinging tails. There was a pleasant confusion of sounds, carters calling to their horses, fowls cackling, and pigeons cooing, the splash of ducks in the pond, the barking of the sheep-dog, and the lower note of Basil's pointer.

The next moment it seemed as if all the dogs gave tongue at once. Basil came in sight, talking to one of the shepherds, and I ran down to ask him if he thought I might go in the park.

"Certainly. I have the Earl's permission for any of us who would like to go there."

"I should like very much. There are hardly any primroses yet in the lanes, and that slope up to the coppice is quite yellow with them."

"You had better go and see," said Basil ; and then he turned to the shepherd, and I understood that I was interrupting business.

I went back to the house for a basket, and then down the fields and into the park by the side gate that Basil always used. It was solitary but pleasant. The sun streamed through the leafless branches, and threw a lattice-work of shadows on the grass below. There was still a litter of last year's leaves and twigs underfoot, but young ferns were pushing their curled fronds through, and tiny plants were weaving a veil of green above. Rabbits ran across my path, and scudded away from me, as I advanced into the park ;



"I TURNED HASTILY, AND SAW MISS TEMPLE JUST BEHIND ME."—Page 151.



deer were browsing in the distance ; the grey embattled castle flashed its many windows in the morning sun.

I looked at the great entrance, with its quaint device of carved otters on either side—strange heraldic creatures it would have puzzled a naturalist to classify—and wondered if it might not have been better for Basil if he had never passed within those oddly-guarded doors. Better? Who was I that I should dare to say? Happier certainly, but, as Basil had reminded me, happiness was only an accident of this life, and I owned as I looked at the loveliness around me, that east wind and snow and driving rain had perhaps had as large a share in producing it as the sunshine and south wind that made to-day so fair and bright.

It was not long before I came to the slope I had seen from my window, the slope where the mysterious footsteps had dinted the white snow, and where now the primroses were starring the young grass. They were so plentiful, I had only to put out my hand and pluck as many as I would. My basket was soon full, and I was returning with my spoils, when a voice behind me made me start.

"You have been luckier than I, Miss Graham," said a girl's voice, with a peculiar clearness of intonation that gave it almost a foreign effect. "I wish you would tell me where to find such flowers as those."

I turned hastily, and saw Miss Temple just behind me. She had a basket in her hand, and a few primroses in it, but nothing like the abundant harvest of mine.

"Will you not have these?" I asked, colouring as much from excitement as nervousness. How little Miss Temple could guess the emotion I felt at the sound of the voice that had such charm for Basil, at the sight of the girl whose peril had moved him so deeply, whom even now I believed he loved.

"I will not take these from you, thank you. But if you would kindly tell me where you found them?" she replied.

"On the hill-side below the coppice," I explained. "I should not have known, but I can see it from my window, and it looks quite yellow with them."

"I should never have thought of looking for them there," said Miss Temple. "You see I have not been here before in spring, and I don't know their haunts. You mean the coppice where the ghost went, I suppose?"

"Yes," I said, looking at the frank eyes, that met mine so simply, with quite a feeling of relief. If I had ever accepted Dr Cheriton's theory of the ghost, I should have renounced it on the spot. No girl who had enacted the part he had supposed could have spoken of it afterwards like this. But, indeed, as I stood face to face with Ellinor Dieudonné Temple, I felt that the whole idea was an impossible insult. Dr Cheriton and I had had many arguments about it, and I could only wonder that the acute, clear-headed doctor could be so self-deceived. "Slippers or no slippers," I told myself now, "these are not the feet that took that midnight walk. There is another explanation, if we had but the wit to find it."

"It was you who saw the ghost, was it not?" Miss Temple went on. "I think your brother told me so."

"I saw the figure that left the footsteps in the snow. It could not have been a ghost if it did that, could it?"

"No," agreed Miss Temple, and again the clear dark eyes looked frankly into mine. "Do you know my name?" she asked, suddenly. "I know yours from seeing you with Mr Chayter and Mr Ford—but perhaps I ought to have introduced myself."

"No," I said, smiling at the apology in voice and eyes. "I know you quite well, Miss Temple; I have seen you often in church, and I saw you at that concert, soon after you came, and then again on the ice."

"The day I was taken ill? Yes—I remember you were there." She sighed, as if the memory were a sad one—as no doubt it was to her—and then she asked me if I would come and help her pick the primroses she wanted. "It is dull walking alone, and you seem as solitary as I am," she added, with a smile.

I shall always remember that walk. Far above me as the Earl of Otterbourne's ward could not but be, there was a gracious simplicity about this charming girl that made it impossible to remember her rank when she chose to lay it aside. She chose now. No compeer of my own could have been more friendly, or addressed me in tones of simpler equality. I felt that she was not "talking down" to me; that the subjects she discussed were the subjects she was

interested in herself. Books and flowers are—or should be—dear to all girls, and so long as we kept on English soil, we discovered a similarity of taste that was pleasant. Lord Otterbourne's ward had lived too much abroad not to have more varied experience and a wider range of reading than mine, but we had enough in common to understand that the same things stirred our interest and moved our sympathies, in whatever language they might be expressed.

And then we came to nearer interests; and the services in Hazelford church, the creditable singing of the little choir, and Miss Fielding's excellent performance on the harmonium, were all fruitful topics. But perhaps I felt more than ever drawn to my beautiful companion when she said, with a deprecating look—

"You'll think me very stupid, I daresay, but I don't care for *too* much music in a service. I'm not very musical, I'm afraid—not half as much as I should like to be—and though I do think I can feel and understand it sometimes, there's a great deal I don't care for at all."

"That is just my case! There are some things I like very much—oh! more than I can say—" I said, thinking of Basil and his violin, "but a great deal is quite a sealed book to me."

"I wonder at that, when your brother is so musical."

"But Basil is not really my brother. Surely you did not think he was?"

"No; but one forgets that when one sees you

together. Long before I knew Mr Ford I used to see you in church, and think how fond of each other you seemed. I suppose a half-brother can be as much to you as a whole one if you like to let him."

"But he is not a brother at all," I explained "That is, he is only an adopted one."

And then I told her Basil's history, and the dark, beautiful eyes grew soft with interest and emotion. She did not speak till I had done, and then she said in a low voice that was full of sympathy—

"Thank you for telling me. I understand Mr Ford so much better now. I know how it feels so well, for I have neither kith nor kin in the world. I am a foundling too."





## CHAPTER XV.

### KINDRED SPIRITS.

“For Art may err, but Nature cannot miss.—*Dryden.*”

“**I** AM a foundling too,” said Miss Temple, and I was too absolutely amazed to utter a word.

A foundling! When Mrs Fielding had applied the disparaging term to Basil I had hotly resented it, and here was this beautiful and noble-looking girl whom we had deemed so far above him, calmly applying it to herself!

“A foundling!” I said at last, with a sensation of getting my breath. “You must mean it in a very different sense from that in which it is generally used.”

“Must I? Why, I wonder?” she asked, with a rather haughty surprise, and I did not know how to answer her. How could I tell her that she was too proud and too essentially patrician for the name she claimed; that it seemed to me that a more fitting bearing would have been more noble and more suitable, in one who, by her looks and manner, might be of lowly birth? I hesitated, and was less by the slight *hauteur* in her expression, and the remembrance of another “foundling” who had been

cian-looking, and certainly not a whit less proud. Miss Temple went on, with kindling glance.

"A foundling is one, is it not, whose parents are unknown, who is left to live or die as fate—no, as God!—shall decide, and who is found and cherished for pity's sake by those on whom she has no other claim? If that is a foundling, I am one. I do not know who my parents were, I do not know their name, or race, or country! I was found, a helpless, dying child, clasped in a dead woman's arms, and brought to the good man who has been as a father to me—the only father I have ever known, or ever shall know."

"You mean Lord Otterbourne?"

"Yes," she said, "I mean Lord Otterbourne. You, who do not know him cannot understand all that he has done for me—all that he is to me. If he were my own father, I could not love him more."

She broke off, and I saw that her eyes were bright with tears of grateful emotion.

"People do not understand him," she cried. "They think him proud and unsocial, a man who fritters away his time dabbling in literature and art, and neglecting the duties of his calling. Oh, I see it in their faces, all these country squires who spend their days in the saddle, and these clergymen who think two services a week hard work! Even Mr Chayter, who loves him I know, thinks much the same. No one understands him, no one appreciates him—unless it is your brother, Mr Ford."

There was a softening, a thrill in her voice that almost startled me. Yet I could not but understand

that any regard she felt for Basil was merely a grateful recognition of his own feeling for the Earl. I believe that her voice would have thrilled just so for anyone who had rendered Lord Otterbourne a service, nay, even for a dog who had licked his hand.

I noticed that it was the Earl she seemed to regard with such passionate gratitude—not the countess, who, as a woman, might naturally have claimed the larger share of the adopted daughter's love.

"The Earl has a noble face. He is very good—very kind, I should think," I remarked, with a pleasant consciousness of saying something acceptable, but the depth of grateful feeling in the dark beautiful eyes was quite startling.

"Kind? Oh yes, indeed! I love him—I love him with all my heart. I would do anything for him—anything in the world!"

She might have stood for a model of filial devotion, of love transfigured to sacrifice. In the dark glowing eyes was the spirit that sent Iphigenia to the altar, and bent the neck of the meek Jewish maiden to the knife. The look of wistful yearning, the tone of passionate self-surrender stirred me to sudden, and no doubt quite uncalled-for pity.

However willing his ward might be, Lord Otterbourne looked the last man in the world to enforce, or even to accept any sacrifice at her hands. And indeed it was difficult to imagine circumstances that could admit it, or even render it possible. What was there that this penniless recipient of his bounty could bring for sacrifice? The obligation, the benefits were all on her side, or at least so I found myself

thinking, till a glance at the sweet, proud face reminded me that whatever the Earl had done for her, he had not been ill repaid by the happiness the mere unfolding of such a human flower must have brought to the childless man's home.

Oh, my dear, my dear! I am glad to remember that I loved and admired you from the first day we met—that some subtle sympathy drew our souls even then together, some bond, whose source and origin we never guessed, claimed kindred from the first! I was not at an impulsive age, but no school-girl ever found her soul's twin with swifter conviction than I did this spring; and as I looked at the speaking countenance of Ellinor Dieudonné Temple, I felt that the same feelings were stirring also in her breast.

*Dieudonné!* the name I had thought so foreign, and almost whimsical for an English girl to bear, acquired a sudden sweet significance. God-given—this was how her sponsors had regarded the “foundling” thrown upon their care. The Earl's dignified face seemed to gain new dignity in my remembrance from the thought.

“I saw your name in a note you wrote to Basil once,” I said, “and I thought it a curious one then. I understand it now, and I like it very much.”

“I like it too, and that is why I always sign it in full. I am called Donnie for short, and sometimes Nora, but Dieudonné is the name I love best. I should like to be that to them always—never to cost them sigh or tear if I could help it.”

“That is very nice of you. But perhaps, if you

did, you would be that all the same," I said, with my usual lameness of expression. My mother and Charlie were expansive and fluent enough, but I was more like my reserved and diffident father. Indeed, my mother often said that shyness made me as reserved as pride made Basil, and perhaps only a woman of my mother's fluent and expressive speech could have expressed the difference and similarity so well. I wished I had had my mother's tongue, or even Miss Temple's, as I blundered out my meaning, but the girl who was named Dieudonné understood.

"You mean that sighs and tears are His sending also?" she said with a smile. "It is like Mr Ford's sister to say so. A year ago I should have thought it a very strange idea. But not now—not since I have known your brother Basil."

There was not the slightest hesitancy before she pronounced his name, and the clear direct regard she turned on me forbade the thought that it had any special interest for her. No faintest colour wavered in the pure ivory cheek, the long curled lashes neither trembled nor drooped. There was not a girl in Hazelford, I decided, who would have uttered Basil's name with quite this majestic indifference. The Earl's ward might be a foundling, but it was evident she held herself too far above his steward to have the faintest feeling about him, or the slightest reluctance to discuss him. On the contrary, she seemed, perhaps because her quick insight showed her that no other topic could possibly have been so welcome to me, as willing to talk of him as I could have been myself.

I was willing. If anything could unloose my

tongue, it was the opportunity of talking of Basil to a sympathetic listener. Led on by the sympathy in Miss Temple's mobile face and expressive eyes, I poured out my heart about him, and it was only when I found myself at the little gate that led into the lane by the Home Farm, that I knew how far we had come, and how long I must have been holding forth.

"I have been very selfish and forgetful—I am afraid I must have bored you: I never know when to stop when I begin to talk about Basil," I stammered, but Miss Temple did not look offended.

"I was not bored, I was interested," she said, with her sweet candid smile. "I never had a brother, and the way you feel about him seems so strange and beautiful. Nothing about Mr Ford seems quite like other people, I think—not even his sister."

She held out her hand, and wished me good-bye, but when I had passed through the gate, I looked round and saw her looking after me with a curious wistfulness.

"I should like to think that you would come in the park—that we should see each other again, Miss Graham. Will you be there to-morrow, do you think?"

"I will come if you like—if you wish it."

"Thank you, I should like, I do wish it!" she replied.

She smiled once more, and bowed, and disappeared amongst the trees, and I went my way down the lane, and saw Dr Cheriton's gig standing at the gate of the Home Farm.

The sight drove Miss Temple from my mind.

Charlie must be worse — dear, bright, impulsive, lovable Charlie! Charlie, whom I felt now as if I never loved enough—Charlie, who was my brother in a nearer sense even than Basil. I hurried home with wildly beating heart, dreading what there might be to hear, but Basil looked up with a smile that was too mischievous not to be reassuring.

“So you have come at last,” he said, looking absurdly amused, though indeed, I could not see what there was to be amused at.

“At last! Yes, indeed, I began to think you never were coming,” said Dr Cheriton. “But what is the matter? You look quite pale.”

He put me in a chair, and had his professional fingers on my wrist before I could utter a word.

“Unsteady—quick—weak!” I heard him mutter: “but your colour is coming back, A glass of wine, Ford! You should not let Miss Graham take such long walks. Or is it that something has startled or upset you?” he asked, looking at me with an unnecessary anxiety that made me quite nervous.

Basil suggested, with wicked gravity, that perhaps I had met a cow, and though at any other time I should have resented the imputation on my courage, I allowed it to pass without protest. I could not tell Dr Cheriton that his own appearance, and the fears it had suggested on Charlie’s behalf, had caused my alarm; and at least it was comforting to see that Basil could jest, even at my expense. Charlie could not be very ill if Basil could joke like this; and, indeed, when I asked after him, Dr Cheriton said he was all but well.

"In riotous health and spirits," Charlie's doctor reported, "and growling like a bear at having to keep quarantine. Patients are always unmanageable when they get a slight attack of anything infectious. They think they must *be* well as soon as they feel well, and do their best to spread infection broadcast. If there was a lock-up for convalescents, we should soon stamp out zymotic disease!"

"Hear him!" cried Basil, "he's off at score. I don't know much about what 'zymotic' may mean, but I do know it's a word that acts on Cheriton much as a red rag would on Deva."

"How is that amiable beast?" inquired the doctor. "A more fell and truculent expression I never saw in any animal's face. I hope Miss Graham gives him a wide berth?"

"Miss Graham runs indiscriminately from everything that carries a horn," Basil declared maliciously; and then he and Dr Cheriton got into a discussion on the respective merits of Devons and Short-horns, in which I am bound to say that the doctor showed himself much better acquainted with bucolics than Basil had appeared to be with medicine.

That evening I told Basil of my meeting with Miss Temple, waiting, like a coward, as I dare say I was, till the dusk hid our faces from each other. Yet it was for his sake, not for mine, that I feared the light. I think he knew it, that he understood at least something of the feelings that stirred my heart and thrilled my voice as I spoke to him of the girl for whom he had owned his love so short a time before, and whom I feared he yet loved better than he would admit—or perhaps even better than he knew.

He listened quietly enough, and made no comment on what I told him, but his kiss that night seemed even more tender than usual, and long after I had gone to bed I heard the weird, plaintive tones of my brother's violin.

I wondered if I had been wise to tell him all that Miss Temple had said as to her own position. That the Earl's ward had called herself a foundling might perhaps have suggested impossible dreams of an equality that did not and could not exist. Whatever her birth, Lord Otterbourne's ward was as far out of his reach as ever ; and, even if it were not so, was she not also Colonel Hazelford's betrothed ? Anxiously I pondered it all, as I lay and listened to the wailing strains that rose in the stillness, and seemed to speak so plainly of unavailing sorrow, of unutterable longing, of vain and wild regret.

But when I met Basil in the morning, he asked me if I had any commands for Hazelford, and I understood that whatever thoughts might embitter his nights and pour themselves out in those passionate strains, the morning had found him resolute as ever to do his duty. It was not Miss Temple's hopeless lover who was picking out the best of my primroses to take to the Rectory—it was May Fielding's betrothed, whose duty and whose full purpose it was to forget the very existence of Ellinor Dieudonné Temple.



## CHAPTER XVI.

### AN UNEXPECTED ARRIVAL.

“All Nature is but art, unknown to thee ;  
All chance, direction which thou canst not see.”—*Pope.*

I should not be my hand, I was firmly resolved, that should put any stumbling blocks in my brother's path, but unwilling as I was to be in any sense a link between the Home Farm and the Castle, I could not break my engagement to meet Miss Temple in the park. I had, indeed, no desire to break it. Basil had gone into Hazelford, and I felt that as far as he was concerned, I might go with a clear conscience ; while, for myself, there was nothing I should like better than to see again the ardent and gracious creature I admired so much, whose nature seemed so sympathetic, and whom I felt I could so easily love.

And certainly, if I had thought Miss Temple charming yesterday, she was not less so to-day. Our conversation was on less personal topics, but sometimes the impersonal is a surer index of personality. Our ideal heroes and heroines are a guide to our own minds, and I felt that I knew Miss Temple better after an hour's discussion of her favourite authors,

than I might have done after a month of ordinary intercourse. Her range of reading was wider than mine, but if I could not share her enthusiasm for Dante and La Motte Fouqué, she could share mine for Shakespeare and Scott, for Thackeray and George Eliot, and the host of minor lights that stud our modern skies.

The characters that lived on their pages were alive for us also this spring morning, and roamed through Hazelford Park with us, and made us partners of their sorrows and their joys. The soft sward was trodden by quite other feet than ours, other figures were mirrored in the lake's still waters, and vanished in the dusky paths amid the trees. For us they were all intensely real, and we sympathised with their sufferings and rejoiced in their happiness with the intimate sympathy of intimate knowledge. The hand of genius had laid bare their hearts, and we knew them better than perhaps we should ever know our actual fellow-creatures. On the whole, we were in full accord about them, but I noticed that Miss Temple's admiration was always given to the noble and lofty rather than the passionate or tender. Portia and Romola were her favourite heroines, but Ophelia and Maggie Tulliver awoke only a pity that was not without a touch of scorn. Ophelia, indeed, she pronounced to be too far removed from actual humanity, and altogether too "sketchy" to be regarded as anything but a poet's dream, but I saw with surprise that she considered Maggie almost as unreal.

"There may be women like that—but it seems unnatural that anyone should allow one feeling to gain such absolute dominion over all the rest."

"It might not be right, but you can hardly call it unnatural," I contended, "when you remember that the feeling was *love*."

Little as I knew of love myself, I knew at least that it was the mightiest power in most women's lives ; but, betrothed bride as Miss Temple was, it seemed as if she knew even less than this.

"Love?" she said calmly. "But that is always exaggerated in poetry and fiction. Of course people love each other in real life, but they don't go out of their minds about it.

"Don't you believe in love?" I asked, rather nettled by the lofty air and superior smile.

"Not in that kind," said Miss Temple with decision. "It might have been possible once perhaps, in the old days when men cared more for a woman's smile than for place or privilege, or riches or fame. How could we care in that way now, when love is just an accident in a man's life, something that advances his interests or amuses his leisure, but which he leaves or takes with almost equal indifference?"

I thought of the strange weird strains that had told, only last night, of a man's passionate pain, and looked at the serene scornful face with a feeling of wonder, and almost of reproach. It seemed a mockery that the girl who, however unconsciously, had almost broken my brother's heart, should not even believe that hearts could break. Had she not loved, herself? Was not her engagement a witness that her own heart was less invulnerable than she would own? Had it been anyone else, I might have imagined that the explanation lay in the supposition that her hand had been given without her heart, but it was impossible

to look at Ellinor Dieudonnée Temple and insult her by such a thought. What possibilities of passionate devotion there were in every line of the proud tender face! Whatever she might profess, I felt sure that hers was a nature whose love would be not less than other women's, but infinitely fuller and deeper, more tender and more true.

"I think we shall be friends," she said as we parted, "and you do not know how I long for a friend. It is so lonely here, and *triste*, as I always heard your England was."

"My England? I think it is your England, too. If you are not quite like English girls, at least you are like no others," I said with conviction, and I knew from her smile that she was pleased.

"It is what I would like to think myself," she said, drawing up her slight, stately figure, "as I would like to have been Roman when *Romanus sum* was still a word of power."

She was ambitious and haughty as any Roman of them all, I thought, this girl whom Basil had dared to love! Had there been no other barrier between them, would not her own nature have been the most insuperable of all? Yet she was walking with me, and asking for my friendship with a sweet humility that seemed to contradict my own conclusions.

Full of contradictions, indeed, she was, but the interest I felt in her was only whetted by them. I felt sure that, frank as she seemed, there were depths in her nature which I had not yet sounded, closed chambers into which I had not been permitted to look. But already I was learning to love her, and love and trust are eternally and essentially the same.

I felt that to know more would only be to love more, and looked forward with perfect confidence to whatever time might yet reveal. If only our friendship had not to struggle with such diversities of station and circumstance, if our paths in life were not likely to lie so far apart!

Apparently Miss Temple was as anxious as I could be to make the most of the time we were able to spend together. Every morning I found her waiting for me in the park, and many were the invitations I received to dine and spend the evening at the Castle. For some time I refused them all. I was too shy to go without Basil, and I knew too well how much better it was that he should decline.

But at last came a formal invitation from the Earl and Countess that was too much like a command to be disputed. Basil said we must accept it, and I could only do as I was bid.

"I wish they had not asked us," I said ungratefully. "I shan't know what to do—I shan't know what to talk about—above all, I shan't know what to wear."

"Do as you would do anywhere else—talk about anything that interests you—wear either black or white, if you want to look well," said Basil sententiously.

"Black or white! That's what men always say. They've no idea of colour."

"They've pretty strong ideas about looks, though," retorted Basil. "Women always look best in one or the other, unless it's in those dark blue gowns you wear sometimes at tennis."

But as blue serge was clearly inadmissible, I hoped Basil's ideas of feminine costume would be satisfied

with the white lace I had felt it rather foolish to put in my box. But folly, as well as wisdom, is sometimes justified of her children, and the dress I had thought too "fine" for any occasions likely to arise in Basil's bachelor *ménage*, was suitable enough for a quiet dinner at the Castle.

No one else was going, I knew; and indeed, it was difficult to see whom else they could have asked. Whatever Lord Otterbourne and his family might do, few of their magnificent neighbours would have cared to sit down to dinner with the steward and the steward's sister. I accepted the fact, as regarded myself, with the equability with which we accept east wind or chicken-pox, as something disagreeable no doubt, but against which it is useless to protest; but as regarded Basil, I told myself proudly that the loss was not his, but theirs. How handsome he was looking to-night, I thought—how refined, how aristocratic in the best sense in which we can use the word!

My heart swelled with love and pride as I walked quietly along beside him. He did not seem inclined to talk, and I had plenty to think of as we passed under the budding elms of Hazelford Park. I had never seen Basil at the Castle, or in Miss Temple's society, and I wondered much how he would go through the evening. If there would be more pain or pleasure in it, I could not even guess. His face was set and pale, it was true, but on his lips was the foreshadowing of a smile, and in his eyes a light to which they had long been strange.

And it was all for a woman whom he might not love, and whose love had long since been given to another man!

"Shall we see the Countess, do you think?" I asked, when the silent walk had become almost unbearable.

"I should think not. She hardly ever dines with them, unless they are quite alone."

"I don't know whether to hope we shall see her or not. I am curious to see her, but I am half afraid of her. I fancy she must be stern and repelling; Miss Temple seems to like the Earl so much the best."

"Stern and repelling? Oh!" cried Basil, rousing himself, and speaking quite earnestly. "Whatever Lady Otterbourne may be, she is not that! Her face is one of the sweetest, as it is certainly one of the saddest I ever saw."

And, indeed, when I saw it, I agreed with him. Kind, and noble-looking, and dignified as the Earl's face was, there was a charm about his wife's fair, delicate countenance that his would never know. Contrary to Basil's expectation, the Countess received us herself, and I was sure that the unusual exertion was made on my account. Unless Lady Otterbourne's looks belied her, she was exactly the woman to show not less but more courtesy to those whose station was inferior to her own.

White as her hair was, I felt sure she was considerably younger than the Earl. The contrast between the white hair and delicate skin had all the piquancy which strikes us in the *poudrée* portraits of our grandmother's young days, and gave her eyes the brilliancy for which they were famous then. What beautiful eyes they were, the blue even more nearly the sapphire shade than I had expected, and the pupils so large as to make it seem still more deep. For the

rest, her features were small but fine, the lips a little parted, the teeth singularly white. The mouth drooped a little at the corners, and this and the pensive expression of the eyes gave the effect of sadness, of which Basil had spoken ; but when she smiled, her expression was wonderfully sweet.

"I am glad to see you," she said, giving me a hand so small and fine, and white, that the diamonds glittering on it seemed its only fit and natural adornment. "Donnie tells me how kind you have been in walking with her. It was good of you. She has been so much alone lately, though now, I hope, her loneliness is over."

I murmured something as appropriate as a somewhat hazy conception of her meaning allowed. I did not understand why Miss Temple's loneliness was to be considered so suddenly at an end, for something in Lady Otterbourne's glance, and the blush which sprang to Miss Temple's cheek, forbade the idea that she referred to my companionship. But the next moment the mystery was solved by the entrance of a gentleman in whom I recognised Colonel Hazelford, and who bowed to Basil without speaking, and acknowledged his introduction to me in a similar frigid manner.

But coldly and haughtily as he bowed, I was sure that as Lady Otterbourne introduced us, he shot a glance of startled scrutiny at me, as if my name or face had struck him as familiar, or at least as having some association for him. Perhaps Miss Temple had been talking of me, I thought, and perhaps—absurd as the idea seemed—he resented her friendship with me. But as he soon after began to talk to me pleasantly enough, I concluded I had been mistaken in this

supposition. Still I had not been mistaken as to that curious inquiring glance, nor I think as to the meaning of it. I might not have noticed it but for the conviction thrilling through me that somewhere—somewhere, if I could only remember where!—I had seen him before. I felt it more strongly than ever now, but try as I would to remember, I was utterly at fault.

"I suppose you are like every Graham I ever met, and claim descent from Bonnie Dundee?" he observed, with the soft cynical smile that seemed natural to him.

"I believe there is a remote connection, but I don't insist upon it," I said indifferently.

"You are more charitable than most of your clan! Scotch people always expect their friends to have such robust faith in all their 'forbears.' You are Scotch, I suppose?"

"My forbears were, but our family has been too long in England to call itself anything but English."

"There are a good many Grahams in the army," observed Colonel Hazelford. "I wonder if you have any relations there?"

"Why can't you ask plainly who I am?" I thought to myself. "You're evidently dying to know, though I can't imagine why." And then I answered demurely and aloud—

"My father was in the army, but he has been dead many years now."

I looked full at my inquisitive neighbour as I spoke, and I was quite sure that he looked relieved. Whether he would have said anything to explain either the curiosity or the relief I could not tell; Lord Otterbourne came to take me down to dinner, and our little colloquy came abruptly to an end.



## CHAPTER XVII.

### A LITTLE DINNER.

“ And ever, against eating cares,  
Lap me in soft Lydian airs,  
In notes with many a winding bout  
Of linked sweetness long drawn out,  
Untwisting all the chains that tie  
The hidden soul of harmony.”—*Milton*.

THE dinner was served in what was called the small dining-room, a room that was small, no doubt, in comparison with the banqueting-hall, but that seemed to me of sufficiently imposing proportions to make the name a laughable misnomer. It was rather a gloomy room, unless brilliantly lighted. The walls were painted in sober green, and hung with dark family portraits in massive frames, and the ponderous furniture was of carved oak.

To-night, however, the long dining-table was dark and bare. A round table was laid out in the deep embrasure of a large bay-window, and the shaded lamps upon it served further to accentuate the gloom of the wide spaces on either hand. The rest of the room was barely lighted by candelabra on the walls, and the twinkling candles, fading swiftly to faint points of light, only seemed to show the length of

the unoccupied space, as the subdued echo of our voices told of the loftiness of the groined and decorated ceiling above us.

The Countess was served in her own apartment, and the rest of us sat down to the round table, with an absence of state or formality that relieved the nervous apprehension I was beginning to be a little ashamed of. Lord Otterbourne was on one side of me, and Colonel Hazelford on the other, and beyond him was Miss Temple, with Basil between her and the Earl. Servants in the Hazelford liveries stood behind each chair, and noiselessly supplied our wants, except that behind Colonel Hazelford was a tall, striking-looking man, dark as the Hindu valet I had seen on my visit to the Castle with Uncle Chayter, but of much more independent bearing. He seemed very attentive to his master's requirements, but took no part in waiting on any one else.

The Earl and Basil were soon absorbed in a musical discussion, and as Miss Temple sipped her soup in silence, and looked, I thought, rather nervous and constrained, the burden of conversation fell on Colonel Hazelford. He tried one or two topics with Miss Temple, but they fell so flat that I did not wonder that at last he turned to me.

"Are you fond of music, Miss Graham?" he inquired, "or do you think with me, that delightful as it is, it is possible to have a little too much of it?"

The faintest half-glance at the Earl and Basil seemed to point the words, and made my reply doubly guarded.

"I never tire of my brother's music," I said quietly,

and though Miss Temple did not seem to be listening to us, I knew that she smiled.

"Is Mr Ford your brother?" he asked indifferently. "A half-brother, I suppose?"

"Well, no," I began, and then I stopped. I do not think the Colonel as much as heard the lame remark, and I was not sorry. I could not go into explanations then. The story I had told Miss Temple in the privacy and solitude of Hazelford Park was not one I was inclined to repeat to Colonel Hazelford with servants behind our chairs, and Basil himself opposite to us. Evidently he was not curious, and was quite willing to take my silence for assent without investigation.

"Ford is a musical name, I fancy," he observed. "There was a fellow in my old regiment, out in India, a trumpeter——"

The glass I was about to drink from dropped from my fingers, and shivered on my plate. Trumpeter Ford! How little Colonel Hazelford knew how much that name meant to me and to Basil! He turned to me now with quite uncomprehending concern.

"Miss Graham! Is anything the matter? You have not hurt yourself, I trust?" he asked, while the servants removed the broken glass, spread a clean serviette over the soaked cloth, and supplied me with another plate, as if such services were part of the usual routine of dinner at Hazelford Castle.

"No—it is nothing—I was foolish to be so startled," I stammered, while the Earl, considerably, continued his conversation with Basil, with-

out even looking my way. I believe he thought the whole affair a piece of country *gaucherie*, but I was too startled and agitated to care what he thought. Trumpeter Ford! Who could tell what revelations I might not be on the verge of? I left my fresh supply of fish untasted, and turned eagerly to Colonel Hazelford.

"Did you know him?" I asked. "Did you really know Trumpeter Ford?—the one who was killed at——"

This time it was Colonel Hazelford's turn to look dismayed.

"Hush!" he cried, before I could finish the sentence. "I know what you mean—but some words are *taboo* here. I was not thinking of all that when I mentioned him, poor fellow, but only of his playing. He was trumpeter in the regimental band, but nothing came amiss to him in the way of music. Trumpet, horn, or flute, violin, 'cello, or double-bass—he was a dab at them all, a band in himself, a regular musical genius."

I thought of little Basil's "tum-tum man," and felt myself flush with excitement.

"Was he—was he anything like my brother?" I asked eagerly.

"Well, he was tall and fair, if I remember right—not a bad-looking fellow at all—but only a common soldier, you know. Surely you don't imagine there could be any relationship?"

It was an indirect compliment to Basil, I suppose, but I was too anxious to care about compliments.

"I should like to know anything you could tell me

about him," I said earnestly. "I am very much interested in him though I know nothing but his name, and that he perished in the massacre——"

"Ah, yes, yes! exactly," interrupted Colonel Hazelford. And then in a lower voice he added rapidly, "Pray, don't allude to that *here*. There were circumstances that make it too painful. The Countess lost her only sister there, and—and, in short, we never talk about it."

Miss Temple, who had been looking at us with an expression of concern, leant forward and added, in a whisper :—

"It was not only her sister, but her child. He was going to England with his aunt, and perished with her, and the Countess has never been the same since."

"Don't talk of it!" cried Colonel Hazelford, in an agitated voice. He absolutely shuddered, and drank off a glass of water before he could speak, and I looked at him with more liking than I had hitherto felt. He had evidently more sensibility than I had given him credit for, I reflected, but indeed, was not Ellinor Temple's love a guarantee that he must possess far more good qualities than his cynical manner allowed to appear?

I looked from him to his betrothed, who was looking lovely, as usual, and as usual in a style peculiar to herself. Her dress was of rich black lace, and a black lace mantilla was thrown, Spanish fashion, about her shoulders and her head. The pins that fastened it were set with rubies, and a cross of the same rich gems glowed at the fair white throat.

Most English girls would have looked awkward or conscious in the unaccustomed garment, but Miss Temple wore it with easy grace, as if to the manner born.

I saw Basil's eyes rest upon her once with a look of passionate admiration, but I do not think she saw it. Had she seen and understood it, I think—knowing what I know now—that even Ellinor Dieudonnée Temple could hardly have preserved that air of superb indifference and composure. Whether she saw it or not, she made no sign, giving apparently her chief attention to the dinner she trifled with rather than ate, and speaking very little to any of us. To Basil, I noticed, she did not speak at all. There was certainly a difference in her manner, a constraint I had never seen before, and that, rightly or wrongly, I attributed to Colonel Hazelford's presence. She was Miss Temple all over—not the Dieudonnée I had known in the park; but when we left the table, she drew my arm through hers caressingly.

“Do you care to go into the drawing-room? It is so lovely outside, and here in the house one cannot breathe.”

I had not thought the spring evening at all oppressive, but I acceded to her wish for fresh air, only stipulating that she should put on something warmer than the lace mantilla that was more suited for Andalusian than English skies.

“Why?” she asked, looking at me with dark mutinous eyes. “Am I so valuable to anyone—or is life so precious to me?”

Nevertheless she asked for shawls, and when they

were brought she condescended to put one on. I had not ventured to answer her questions—how could I, when the hall was lined with servants?—and I do not think she expected it. It was not the *Cui bono?* of scepticism, or even of despair—it was a momentary impatience and petulance of which she was already ashamed.

“We will not go far,” she said turning on to one of the sheltered terraces that were cut in the side of the cliff. “I do not want to be foolish—but it is so comfortable to be here. It seems more possible to be good out here, where nothing comes between us and heaven.”

She turned a yearning face up to the clear sky, the sky that seems so far to impatient spirits, so silent and so cold to the warm sympathies of youth, and shivered a little, and drew her shawl more closely round her. But when I asked if she were cold, she shook her head; and indeed the hand she laid on mine burnt through the dainty glove.

The terrace ran close under the side of the castle that overhung Hazelford. From the town below it could not be distinguished from the face of the cliff, but art had made the narrow ledge a very path of beauty. We walked between rhododendrons and azaleas, and gazed at the meadows below us, and the dark sea beyond, through a fringe of wistaria blossoms, faint and pale as the sky above. For some time we paced the terrace in silence, and then——

“How lovely it all is!” I sighed. “How beautiful it must be to be always surrounded with beauty.”

“Do you care for beauty that means so much

care and thought and pains?" said Ellinor Temple. "Don't you think there is something unnatural about it all, something forced and cold? Would not these alien blooms be happier on their native Himalayas—should not we be even more content with the growth of English soil? When I walked back with you yesterday, a laburnum hung over the gate of the Home Farm, and a lilac close by scented all the air—and yet you sigh for beauty! When the hedges are white with may——"

"The evening air may be uncommonly chilly!" finished Colonel Hazelford, prosaically. "Nora *mia*, I am bidden to remind you of the treacherous nature of an English spring. A thousand pardons if I have spoiled your eloquence! You shall conclude your pastoral remarks as we go indoors."

Miss Temple took the arm he offered, but she said no more. Perhaps the half-sneering tone checked her, or perhaps the current of her thoughts was changed by Colonel Hazelford's appearance on the scene. She fell in with his lighter vein, and talked gaily enough as we went back to the house. The strains of a violin showed that the Earl and Basil had left the dining-room also, and Colonel Hazelford told us we should find them in Lady Otterbourne's boudoir.

"Lady Otterbourne wishes to hear Mr Ford play, so the rural Strephon——"

He stopped short, checked less, I think, by anything my face expressed than by the haughty offence in Miss Temple's.

"Apologise!" she said curtly. "It is the least you can do."

"I own it," he said gracefully enough. "Miss Graham, can very sincere regret win pardon for a carelessness that was not intentional rudeness?"

He held out his hand, and I could not but take it, but I think he found his peace harder to make with his beautiful betrothed. I saw him follow her, as she walked on, and whisper in the small white ear, and, though I could not hear the question, the reply was significant.

"When Colonel Hazelford can forgive himself for having ceased to be a gentleman!" said Miss Temple, with biting distinctness; and she went on, erect and scornful, her head in the air, and a dark flush on her cheek. He drew back discomfited, and bit his moustache with a mortified air, and I felt more sorry for him than I should have thought possible a few minutes ago. Decidedly Miss Temple was not an easy mistress, nor placable when once put out.

She would hardly look at Colonel Hazelford the rest of the evening, but talked perseveringly to me in the brief intervals which music left for conversation, while the unlucky Colonel leant over her chair and pulled his moustache disconsolately.

Lady Otterbourne lay on a couch by the window, looking out on the distant waters, on which the moon was just rising, and listening dreamily, with far-away eyes, to the soft tones of Basil's violin.

"Is there anything you would especially like?" he had asked her, as we came into the room.

"Something of Chopin's," she replied, and if the answer was vague, I felt that it was characteristic. She was like "something of Chopin's" herself, this



**"SHE WOULD HARDLY LOOK AT COLONEL HAZELFORD THE REST OF  
THE EVENING."—Page 182.**



delicate, sensitive woman, with her nervous emotional nature, her infinite grace and pathos, her polished manner and fastidious refinement, and the undertone of passionate complaint that made itself felt through it all. As Basil played, her gaze left the moonlit sky, and the wide wandering waters, with their narrow pathway of silver light, and concentrated itself upon his face, with a sort of rapt intensity. There were no lights in the room but the wax tapers on the music-stand, but their soft radiance fell full upon him, and showed his face against the shadowy dusk beyond, as if it were set in a nimbus of light. Something in the colouring, and still more in the expression, reminded me of a painting I had once seen of a head of the angel Gabriel—for this was not the stormy, troubled visage of my brother's lonely hours. A great peace was upon it, strife and bitterness stilled to content, longing and desire soothed to satisfied rest. The moonbeams that showed me Lady Otterbourne's sad sweet face, showed something else, I knew, to him—showed him all the glory and beauty that made Ellinor Dieudonnée Temple peerless among women. The small head that held itself so royally stood out in the cold white light, with the peculiar distinctness of outline and obliteration of colour which moonlight imparts, but Miss Temple's beauty owed too little to colour to lose its effect. It seemed to me, indeed, that she had never looked so lovely. In the dim half-lights that pervaded the general aspect of the room, she was, I think, unaware how clearly her face could be seen. Never had I seen the expression so unconscious and so natural, never

so melting and so sweet. It was as if she had forgotten everything but the music, to which she was listening as intently as Lady Otterbourne herself. When Basil laid down his bow, it seemed as if the violin's last shivering sigh was echoed by two women in the room. Lady Otterbourne clasped her hands, and raised her eyes to heaven with an expression that reminded me of that which my mother wore when she talked to me of Nelly, and Ellinor Temple bowed her head with a low sudden sob.

For a minute that seemed long, no one spoke; there was the breathless silence that is a musician's best applause. Then Colonel Hazelford broke the spell by rather patronising thanks, the Earl rang for lights, and Lady Otterbourne called Basil to her, and thanked him with graceful earnestness.

Miss Temple still sat spell-bound and silent; she had lifted her head again, but was gazing straight before her, as if she neither heard nor saw. On my low seat beside her, I must have been almost invisible, and Colonel Hazelford certainly neither saw me nor remembered my existence.

"Let us be friends again, Nora," he whispered, bending down and taking one of the hands that were lying so nervelessly in her lap, "I'll say nothing against your friend Strephon after this. He's rather a surly brute in private life, but certainly he can play like Orpheus himself."

Miss Temple came to herself with a start, but she had evidently heard at least the last part of what he said.

"Like Orpheus?" she repeated, in cold, scornful tones. "So it seems, Colonel Hazelford—and with the same results!"



## CHAPTER XVIII.

### FROM ESTHER'S WINDOW.

“ A shadow flits before me ;  
It lightly winds and steals  
In a cold white robe before me.”—*Tennyson.*

COLONEL Hazelford's presence at the Castle naturally put an end to my walks with Miss Temple. I did not even go into the park lest I should mar the perfect solitude in which lovers are supposed to delight, and for some days there seemed to be the entire cessation of intercourse between the Home Farm and the Castle, which I had more than once told myself was the most desirable thing that could happen.

Now that it had happened, I was by no means so clear as to the desirability. Basil was busy, as a man who has an agency and a farm on his hands must needs be in May. It could make little difference to him, I thought, but to me the loss was great. I missed the friend I had so recently gained more than I should have thought possible, and all the more from a half doubt that haunted me, as to whether she was as happy in her engagement as I should like to have believed.

There was a suspicion of conventionality in the whole arrangement ; that the Earl's adopted daughter should wed the Earl's heir was too manifestly expedient, not to suggest the possibility of an element of expediency rather than of romance. And, if Miss Temple had been sincere in disclaiming any belief in the romantic devotion which poets and novelists attribute to their heroes and heroines, she was all the more likely to be the victim—perhaps the not unwilling victim—of such an arrangement. For whether she were willing or not, it seemed to me that the girl, who could consent to it on any terms whatever, could only be regarded as a victim, it mattered little whether to circumstances, or to false views of life and love.

Between my sympathy for Basil, who was throwing himself into his work with a feverish energy that told of an unquiet mind, and perhaps of a heart racked by jealousy and distracted by opposing duties, and my perplexity and anxiety about the friend I had come to love so well, I had plenty of food for sorrowful thoughts. Dr Cheriton, who seemed to have a good deal of practice on our side of Hazelford, and often stopped his gig and came in to see us, rallied me on my low spirits, and told Basil he ought to provide more entertainment for me.

"Why don't you get up a pic-nic, or a haymaking party, and ask us all over?" said this audacious doctor. "I'll come with pleasure, and I'm sure Miss Fielding will be only too delighted. Then there's Miss Potts, and that Admirable Crichton, her nephew ; and the Slater girls, and little Barlowe, the curate,

and those nieces of old Mrs Hall's. Dear me, why, you could get up a party in no time, you see."

"It seems to me that *you're* getting it up," said Basil. "However, I've no objection, except on one point. I object to haymaking before the grass is fit, but if Hazelford likes to come over to tennis, I'll have the lawn mown, and the net put up, Esther shall get out the blue china, and Mrs Munns shall do her best in the way of cakes and cream."

"Hear, hear," cried Dr Cheriton. "There's nothing succeeds like impudence, especially in a doctor. Half the fortunes that have been made in our profession have been made by that—and the other half by humbug."

"Hallo!" cried Basil, "what's the matter now? I thought your profession was the noblest in the world, according to your account."

"So it is—so it might be," said Dr Cheriton sourly, "it would be an adorable profession, if it wasn't for—the patients! Why can't they be content to be cured without insisting on being humbugged? I declare that when Miss Potts keeps me half the morning talking about 'her poor head'—which is a blessing to her, if she only knew it, for at least it gives her something to talk about—I declare, when I have to waste time and words in that way, I'd rather be anything than lose my self-respect like that. Miss Esther, I'll trouble you for another cup; that pot of yours must be a magic one—I always feel so much better after one of your cups of tea."

And, indeed, as he drank it, his irritation manifestly subsided. He got up, looking like another man, and

went away, loading me with unmerited thanks, and declaring that he should drive straight to the "Myrtles"—Miss Potts's cottage *ornée*—before his present "beautiful frame of mind" passed away.

"What a good fellow he is," said Basil. "Esther, I hope you'll be as good to him as he deserves!"

If there is a thing that is exasperating, it is to feel an uncalled-for and utterly misleading blush surging into your cheeks and creeping up to the very roots of your hair. Tears of pure vexation stood in my eyes as I felt the odious colour in my face, and knew that Basil must see it too, and perhaps be drawing all sorts of absurd conclusions.

"Never mind," he said kindly, kissing my burning cheeks, and smiling at the foolish tears in my eyes, "I am glad to think that one of us is to be happy."

He went away without giving me time to answer, and I leant my head on my hands and wept outright.

"Oh Basil, Basil!" I sobbed, "could *I* be happy if you were not?"

I knew—I could not but know—how far happiness was from him, and it seemed cruel of him to talk of mine, as if it were a thing apart. As for the nonsense he fancied about Dr Cheriton, it was all the fault of that ridiculous trick I had of blushing at anything and nothing.

"And really, my dear, at your age you ought to know better!" I said severely, addressing my own reflexion in the glass, as I brushed out my hair that night, and determining to be decidedly frigid and formal the next time Dr Cheriton found the Horse Farm exactly in the line of his afternoon round. I

was very sorry for him, indeed, if *that* was what he really meant, and the kindest thing would be to let him see his mistake.

"But oh dear!" I sighed, "why is everything so *contrary*, I wonder! Why does everybody love the wrong person, and nothing ever come right?"

I don't suppose I was the first impatient soul to ask the question, and probably I shall not be the last. So long as all goes well with us, we are content to ignore the thought of sorrow, as we do that of death, or to accept it with easy philosophy as natural and inevitable; but the quickening touch of personal experience reverses all this. The easy philosopher becomes the fierce controversialist, who disputes every point and takes nothing for granted. What are these sister shadows that pursue us from the cradle to the grave—what, and whence, and why?

Not in this life will the answer be given to any one of us, and probably we should not understand it, if it were. Some day we shall see "with larger, other eyes" than these, and then we shall understand.

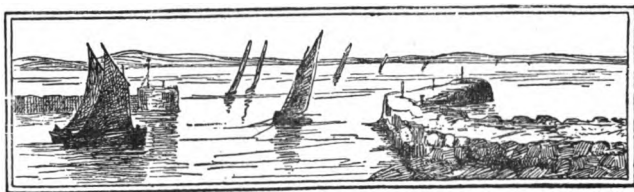
And meanwhile the great mystery of pain perplexes and oppresses us, as it was perplexing and oppressing me to-night.

I went to bed, but I could not sleep. Thoughts of Basil haunted me, and not of Basil only. My brother's sad face with its sapphire eyes seemed to suggest and recall the Countess's in some vague and bewildering manner. I saw Lady Otterbourne with hair as fair as Basil's, and with Basil's look of courage and of trust. And I saw Basil with soft, snow-white locks, and the eternal question in his eyes that seemed to dwell in Lady Otterbourne's. And with

them, in bewildering transition, Miss Temple's dark, beautiful face came and went, now proud and haughty as when she uttered her imperious "Apologise!" to Colonel Hazelford, now soft and sweet as when she listened to Basil's violin; but always with a note of sadness in it I had never seen it wear.

I heard eleven strike, and twelve, and got up restlessly and walked about my room, till I thought fatigue must surely make me sleep. The moonlight was white upon my blind, and I drew it up with some remembrance of the night I had looked out on the snow-covered park, and seen the mysterious white figure that old Jones had taken for a ghost, and whose appearance in the park had never been explained. So far as I knew, it had never been seen again since that winter night, and the subject had gradually dropped from our conversation and our thoughts. To-night the moon was as bright as then, but how changed was the scene! How different from the expanse of snow on which I had looked out four months ago! Instead of bare boughs and leafless branches, was all the verdure of May; instead of a wild white waste, soft slopes of green in which young flowers were springing; instead of the mysterious figure that had disturbed the winter night, a silence and a solitude that were full of peace.

But suddenly my heart leapt up in my breast, and then seemed to stand still. A white shape issued from the coppice and came swiftly down the slope, flitting in and out amongst the trees, as a white shape had flitted over the whiter snow that other night, that was now four months ago.



## CHAPTER XIX.

### THE GHOST EXPLAINED.

“A spirit, yet a woman too.”—*Wordsworth.*

ONCE more I had seen the “ghost,” the fear of which had driven old Jones from the Home Farm; but though my pulses quickened, it was with surprise and excitement, not with fear. There was nothing to be afraid of in a spirit embodied in human form, and able to leave footsteps behind it; but the less frightened I felt, the more curious I became. I watched it eagerly, and though the now leafy trees hid it occasionally from sight, I distinctly saw it pass into the Castle by the ladies’ private door.

Could it be Lady Otterbourne? I wondered. It was currently reported in Hazelford that the Countess was deranged, and though Basil said it was only melancholia, who is to say where melancholy ends and madness begins? The moon was at the full now—might not the mysterious influence she is said to exert have been just the determining force in crossing the indistinguishable line? Might not melancholy have quickened to madness, and might not this

wandering figure be that of the poor Countess seeking her dead child?

It was at least a more plausible theory than Dr Cheriton's had been. If, even before I knew her, I had felt it impossible that the midnight wanderer should be Ellinor Dieudonné Temple, I scouted the idea now as indignantly as Basil could have done.

Of course, when I went down to breakfast, I told Basil what I had seen, and he agreed with me that it might perhaps have been Lady Otterbourne. Whether he actually thought so, or whether he only accepted the idea as an escape from the alternative theory, I could not tell. He did not even refer to Dr Cheriton's suggestion, but in his manner was an ostentatious abstinence and indefinable protest that told me he had not forgotten it.

We were rather long over breakfast that morning, but late as we were, and erratic as were Dr Cheriton's visits, I think even Basil was surprised to see the familiar yellow gig pull up at the gate before the cloth was cleared.

"I'll change my housekeeper, if I can't get one meal in peace!" Basil declared with mock vehemence; but I was determined not to make a goose of myself again.

"You don't suppose he comes to see *me* at this time of day?" I retorted with spirit.

"'Is Miss Graham at home?' sounds rather like it," said Basil, drily; and the next moment Mrs Munns ushered in the untimely guest, with the announcement—"Dr Cheriton—to see Miss Esther!"

I rose with a great assumption of dignified surprise,

but it was quite thrown away on my irrepressible visitor.

"Miss Graham," exclaimed Dr Cheriton, shaking hands as easily as if eight o'clock in the morning were his usual time for paying calls, "I told you I should spot your ghost, and you didn't believe me; I told you I *had* spotted it, and you didn't believe me; I've come now to tell you that I've seen it, and shaken hands with it, and spoken to it; and it sends its love to you, and hopes you'll go and see it too, as soon as you conveniently can."

"What *do* you mean?"

"I mean that I've been right all along. The ghost is Miss Temple, as I always thought it was."

"What authority have you for saying so?" demanded Basil sternly.

"Her own!" said Dr Cheriton.

He paused a minute, as if to allow us to digest the information, and then he went on, with a laugh at Basil's speechless surprise.

"My dear fellow, you needn't look so fierce or so dumbfounded. The whole mystery lies in a nutshell. Miss Temple is a sleep-walker."

"A sleep-walker!" I ejaculated. It was a solution that had never even occurred to me, and yet how simple it was.

"Yes, a sleep-walker," repeated Dr Cheriton, "or a somnambulist, if you prefer a more learned and less expressive term, like most of your charming sex. If I told a patient she had face-ache, she'd think me an ignorant fellow who only told her what she knew herself, but if I call it neuralgia or tic-douloureux, she's any amount of faith in the diagnosis."

Basil seemed to be listening, but I doubt if he heard a single word of the doctor's tirade.

"A sleep-walker?" he repeated, as if he could hardly credit the fact. "But is not that a very serious condition?"

"To a certain extent it is, of course. It shows an instability of the nervous centres, to say the least, but a good deal depends on the degree. In Miss Temple's case I fancy half the battle would be to find out the disturbing cause."

"How did you find out that it was Miss Temple?" I inquired.

"I was called up in the night to see old Mrs Fosberry, who was 'took with spasms'—as she always is after the lobster salad she never misses a chance of eating—and as I was getting into the gig to come away, what should I see coming down the slope but the regulation white-sheeted ghost! The footman yelled and fled into the house, but I thought I would see it out, so I sat still and kept as quiet as a mouse. It came on pretty quickly, and I soon saw that it was Miss Temple, and that she was far too sound asleep to see me or take any notice of me. So I just watched her into the house, and then I rang the bell and asked to speak to her maid. And I wish now I hadn't."

"Oh, why?" I exclaimed. "Surely it was the best thing to do?"

"So it seemed to my limited intelligence. But the girl was a perfect idiot—one of the shrieking hysterical editions of feminine folly that seem to be sent into the world to make us appreciate sensible women.

The footman had just been raising the house about the ghost, and this ridiculous woman was frightened out of what few senses she ever possessed, and behaved like Bedlam let loose. The end of it was that Miss Temple woke up in a fright, which was the worst thing that could have happened, the Countess scented the disturbance and sent her own woman inquiring and interfering all round, and between them they've kept me there till now."

"But Miss Temple is better now, I hope?" I put in, before Basil could speak. For, indeed, I was afraid of what his anxious voice might betray.

"Better? Oh yes—quite herself again. But the upshot of it all is that I've advised them to have her watched, if only for a time. I want them to get down a trained nurse—for as for expecting a rational report from that idiot of a maid, you might as well expect to gather gooseberries off an apple-tree—but Miss Temple objects so strongly I had to give it up. Then I asked if there was no friend she could have to stay with her—and she said the only one she liked well enough or could endure in her room was yourself. So, now, you know why I am here. And, indeed, Miss Graham, if you would not dislike it, I believe it would be the greatest possible kindness."

He pulled a note out of his pocket, and gave it to me. It was a kind, and even friendly note from Lady Otterbourne, asking me to stay at the Castle for a week, and courteously adding that the circumstances, which Dr Cheriton would explain to me, had accelerated rather than occasioned the invitation.

"Miss Temple was hoping to see you when she

would be more at leisure to enjoy a friend's society," wrote Lady Otterbourne, "but under present circumstances, I trust you will understand the change of plan."

Of course I understood it, and, of course, I was willing to go, and should have been, even if Basil's eloquent eyes had been less urgent in their silent entreaty.

"Lady Otterbourne will send the carriage for you this afternoon," said Dr Cheriton, "and if Ford is inconsolable, I think Charlie may be pronounced out of quarantine now, and he and Mrs Graham could come here while the house is disinfected. What do you say, Ford? Do you like the plan?"

"The *Deus ex Machina* decrees—what can poor mortals do but submit?" said Basil.

And, indeed, I was rather amused at the way in which Dr Cheriton seemed inclined to settle our affairs for us. I thought he quite deserved the delicate rebuke, but he took no notice of it, and only observed that the projected tennis-party appeared to have given general satisfaction, and that we might expect an invasion of "the youth and beauty of Hazelford" early in the week. But even Basil protested at this.

"I certainly can't have it till Esther comes back," he said, decidedly.

"And, certainly, I wouldn't come to it if you did!" said Dr Cheriton. "But I dare say Miss Graham will have tired of her fine friends before then."

He spoke quite bitterly, and I wondered if it was possible he was jealous of my invitation to the Castle.

He certainly looked as if he only half approved of it, though he had been the means of procuring it for me.

"Good-bye," he said, getting up, and refusing any breakfast on the plea that he had already had some at the Castle. "The Home Farm won't seem like itself without you, will it, Ford? But I shall see you at the Castle to-morrow. Remember, you'll be in charge of my patient, and will have to deliver your report."

I wished he would not have looked so absurdly jubilant about it, or that Basil would not have looked so provokingly intelligent, and so unnecessarily amused. But at least I did not blush—or at any rate I should not, if Basil had behaved himself.

When Dr Cheriton had gone, I wrote and accepted Lady Otterbourne's invitation, and Basil drove into Hazelford, to see if my mother and Charlie would come and stay with him, and to bring another dress or two for me. One evening dress was clearly insufficient for a week at Hazelford Castle, as Basil quite agreed.

"You need not be smart, but you must not be dowdy. They are never either one or the other," said my brother, as he carried off the list I had been making out.

He came back alone, except for my precious box, for my mother had pronounced it impossible to get herself and Charlie ready before to-morrow."

"Did you see May?" I asked. And before he spoke, I knew that he had, and that he had been in some way annoyed.

"May can think of nothing but fashion-books just now," he said, irritably. "I know nothing about it,

and care less—but I can't stand the way they ask Potts's opinions, as if he were that man-milliner at Paris—Worth, don't they call him?—himself. I don't believe May will have a gown belonging to her that he hasn't had a finger in choosing; but perhaps I've no right to complain."

"Choosing 'gowns,' as you call them, doesn't mean much," I said consolingly, and thinking this little bit of natural jealousy quite a hopeful symptom.

"No," he sighed. "And if it did, I'm the last man—"

He stopped abruptly, and I looked up and saw that the Otterbourne carriage was at the gate, and that Miss Temple herself was sitting in it. She was looking very much herself, and was full of gratitude and pleasure at my coming.

"It is so good of you to come and take care of me," she said, as I took my place beside her. "Mr Ford, you will not be afraid to trust me with your sister, will you? I know how much she is to you, and it is as kind of you to spare her as it is of her to come."

Basil lifted his hat, and we drove off; but willing as I had thought myself, nay, willing as I was, to be of service to Miss Temple, I could not help a little throb of pain at leaving my brother Basil, though it was only for a week. Miss Temple read my face, as she always did.

"Would all sisters mind as much?" she said wonderingly. "But it only makes it more good of you to come. I believe you would never have agreed to do so if you had not seen how badly you were wanted."

"I shall be very glad if I can really be of use."

"It is not only that. I believe I was glad of any excuse to get you. It seems as if we never saw each other now."

"I have not liked to come while Colonel Hazelford is with you. Even if you did not think me an intruder, *he* might."

"Nonsense," she laughed gaily. "Didn't I tell you we were not that sort of lovers? I believe we are both very much obliged to any one who will come and save us the trouble of entertaining each other."

I laughed too. If I had believed her, I should have thought it sad enough, but I knew it was only her way of talking. She chose to affect a cynical unbelief in what she called "romance," but no one who looked at her could think the cynicism real. Her eyes were too full of feeling, her face too earnest and too passionate for the cold creed she professed.

Colonel Hazelford came down the steps to meet us, and received me more graciously than I expected. My arrival could not be particularly welcome to him, but perhaps he thought my services to his betrothed would atone for the disturbance of his courtship. He looked older by daylight, I thought, his complexion more faded, and the lines about his eyes and mouth more marked and noticeable. Still he might fairly be called a handsome man, and he had what women care more for than good looks, the unmistakable stamp of a gentleman, and a bearing that was decidedly distinguished. It was curious how I felt again, as I did every time I saw him, the conviction that I must have met him before. It wore off after

being a few minutes in his company, but my first impression was always the same. Somewhere I had been chilled by those cold blue eyes, and discomfited by that sarcastic smile—somewhere, if I could only remember where!

But try as I would I could not remember. And, however cold and sarcastic his habitual expression might be, I had to confess that Colonel Hazelford could make himself exceedingly agreeable. Whether he shared Miss Temple's views or not, he was not an exacting lover, and made no objection to my sharing their rambles or their conversation. He talked cleverly, with a man-of-the-world readiness and ease, and I owned, when I got over my first shyness, that my visit was likely to be all the pleasanter for his presence at the Castle.

The Earl was everything that was kind, but the Countess I scarcely saw. She rarely left her room, and when she did, she took no part in general conversation. The only other guest was a young Lady Avondale, whose husband was a distant connection of Lord Otterbourne's. She seemed entirely absorbed in two very pretty and very spoilt children, and took as little notice of Miss Temple as of me; a fact that was the less to be regretted, as the very tones of the high unmusical voice seemed to make Ellinor Temple uncomfortable and nervous.

Very nervous she was I could see, and a good deal unhinged by the discovery of the midnight rambles she had taken so unwillingly.

"It seems so strange, so terrible, to do things without being conscious of them, and to remember

nothing—absolutely *nothing*—afterwards,” she said to me a few nights after I came. “I hate the thought of wandering about, as they say I have been doing—the gazing-stock of half the country-side.”

“Oh no!” I assured her; “very few people have seen you, I am sure. And no one ever recognised you, or they would not have been so frightened.”

“Does Mr Ford know?” she asked nervously.

“Dr Cheriton told us, but——” as I saw her mounting colour, “he would not tell any one else, I am sure.”

“I wish he had not told your brother,” she said in a tone of mortification. And then she added vehemently, “I am glad it was Dr Cheriton who saw me last night. It it had been—anyone else—I should have died of shame.”

“Go to sleep, and don’t be silly!” I ordered her. “There is no shame about it, and it is foolish to talk like that.”

A bed had been made up for me in Miss Temple’s room, for Dr Cheriton’s orders were strict that she should not sleep alone. But since I came, the precaution seemed to have been unnecessary.

I am a light sleeper, but nothing but my own anxiety broke my rest. Once or twice every night I woke, and rose and looked at my charge, but each night her slumber seemed deep and dreamless as a child’s.

“All the better,” said Dr Cheriton, to whom I made a daily report. “Every good night is so much gain. But keep one eye open, Miss Graham—I’m afraid we’re not out of the wood. There’s too much excite-

ment about her to please me, and too much variability."

The last charge was certainly true. "From grave to gay, from lively to severe," she passed through all the changes in the compass of an hour, and no one could even guess which mood would assert its supremacy next. Colonel Hazelford seemed to take it all with bland indifference, but I think he found his wilful and imperious mistress unusually hard to please.

But if she was wilful and imperious one hour, she was gentle and penitent the next, and I dare say he thought—as I did—that the sweet more than atoned for the bitter. And if his beautiful tyrant was capricious and exacting to him, it was only what she was to us all—or rather to all but one. Whatever she was to the rest of the world, she was always docility and sweetness itself to Lord Otterbourne. It was pleasant to see them together, and to realise, as I could not help doing, how much they were to each other, and how his ward's grateful devotion brightened the Earl's saddened life.

On the whole I was spending a very pleasant week. I had rather dreaded the pomp and circumstance that must attend all the details of daily life in an Earl's household ; but it is wonderful how soon we grow accustomed to outward changes, and how loose they sit to the actual realities of existence. Numberless courses and liveried servants became as natural to me as Mrs Munns' roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, or my mother's dainty little dinners, deftly served and waited on by neat-handed, round-cheeked Susan.

The only thing I could not get used to was the dark-skinned servant who stood behind Colonel Hazelford's chair, and whose calm and inscrutable face filled me from the first with almost unreasonable dislike. The man, I learnt from Colonel Hazelford, had been his servant in India, and had followed him to Europe; but he and the Earl's Indian valet were of different race and creed, and could not get on together. Many were their quarrels, Colonel Hazelford said, and I felt no doubt that the fault rested with his own man, Mirza Khan. Siva, the gentle, courteous, mild-mannered Hindu, was a favourite with everyone in the house, even Mrs Fosberry having overcome her aversion to him; but I felt that nothing could make me like Mirza Khan. The quiet, yet hostile glance seemed to cast defiance at every one he met, and even to his master his demeanour was so insolent that I wondered Colonel Hazelford put up with him for a single day.

But the Colonel took his servant's insolence with the same imperturbable indifference as his ladylove's caprices. "Mirza Khan was a good servant, and a good fellow at heart," he maintained, "and when a man had been in your service for twenty years, you could not turn him adrift for little faults of temper."

"All the same, I should be glad if he would keep his temper for those who like it," said the Earl, drily. "Siva has been complaining of his behaviour downstairs, and from what I can hear, your fellow appears to have been decidedly in the wrong. I should be glad if you would speak to him about it, Richard. I can't have Siva molested and annoyed."

Colonel Hazelford shrugged his shoulders. "Of course, I'll do as you like about it," he said, with evident reluctance, "but I doubt if it will do any good. Those black fellows are always wrangling, and I don't suppose anything I can say will stop it."

Certainly I thought the rebuke I heard Colonel Hazelford administering, as I happened to go through the hall a little later, was too mild to be effectual. But mild as it was, it seemed to excite Mirza Khan almost beyond endurance.

"Do *you* threaten *me*?" he cried, fronting his master, with gleaming eyes. "Take care, Sahib! It is not a safe game to play in *this* house, and you know it!"

Both master and man were too excited to observe me; and as for me, the passion in both their faces frightened me so much I was quite unable to move.

Mirza Khan looked beside himself with rage, and Colonel Hazelford's face was livid—and livid, I was sure, with *fear*. He turned away without uttering a word, and literally slunk out of the hall, while Mirza Khan looked after him triumphantly, and gave vent to a low jeering laugh.



## CHAPTER XX.

### TWO ENCOUNTERS.

“I will stand betwixt you and danger.”—*Shakespeare.*

THE hall at Hazelford Castle would have held a modern villa, and still have had room to spare. The floor was of tessellated marble, but the foot fell softly on Eastern rug or costly skin, and the rarely beautiful marbles only showed themselves where no tread might be expected. The walls were hung with priceless pictures, and with armour, each piece of which had a place in history, in story, or in song. The windows, set in the solid masonry of walls ten feet thick, were each a deep recess, furnished with cushioned seats, and screened by thick velvet curtains. They looked out upon the meadows that lay between the castle and the sea, and commanded a splendid view of Hazelford and the low-lying pastures beyond, to the distant shore, where the Channel's blue waters broke in a fringe of white upon the beach. In a large family, a hall like this—spacious and beautiful, and combining opportunities for privacy and for sociability—must have been a favourite gathering-place, but in the present Earl's household it was little used.

No one seemed to think of sitting in it, and except for the window seats, and half-a-dozen uncompromising and forbidding chairs of elaborately-carved backs and plain oak seats, there was nothing to sit on. Colonel Hazelford had probably felt himself secure from interruption when he spoke to Mirza Khan in the great solitary hall, and only the accident of my coming to fetch a book from the library had made me the unintentional spectator of a scene I was not likely soon to forget.

Neither the Colonel nor Mirza Khan had seen me, and as soon as the hall was clear, I sank into the nearest chair, hard as it was, to try and recover my scattered senses. I was startled and agitated, and trembling with nervous excitement, and I did not want to return to Miss Temple till I had somewhat recovered my self-possession. What should I say if she asked me what was the matter?

I could not tell her of the interview I had just witnessed; I could not and I would not, I was sure. I felt that whatever it might mean, Colonel Hazelford had not come well out of it. A man who promises without performing is never an heroic character; a man who shrinks from his own servant is even less heroic. It was fear—I was sure it was!—that had blanched Colonel Hazelford's face, and made him skulk silently away; and the only explanation that could suggest itself was not one to be lightly offered to Miss Temple's ears. Why should her lover have feared his servant, unless Mirza Khan knew something to his master's disadvantage—held, perhaps, some disgraceful secret which Colonel Hazelford feared to have revealed?

All the dislike I had felt for Richard Hazelford, the dislike which his pleasant manners and the fact that he was Miss Temple's chosen husband had begun to dispel, returned in full force. What were pleasant manners in a man who could shrink from his own servant's presence like a beaten hound? And for that other and more valid apology, it was only an aggravation of his sins. That a man like this should be going to marry Ellinor Dieudonnée Temple struck me with a sort of horror. Could the Earl know the kind of man to whom he was about to give his ward? Could Miss Temple even dream that the man she loved was such an one as this?

I felt that they did not, they could not know. If I was sure of anything about the silent and rather haughty Earl, it was that he loved his ward as his own child; and if there was still much in Miss Temple which I did not understand, I was at least certain that she was the last girl in the world to love a man whose honour was ever so slightly smirched.

And then I found myself asking, almost unawares, Did she love Colonel Hazelford? did she even know what love meant?

If any one had asked me the questions I was asking myself, I daresay I should have given a conventional assent; but in my heart I knew that I doubted both.

The more I saw of Miss Temple and Colonel Hazelford, the less I believed that she loved him. Whatever her feeling for him, she was not "in love" with him, I felt sure. And I doubted further if she realised the possibilities of her own nature, or under-

stood that the mild regard she gave to Colonel Hazelford was by no means all it was in her power to bestow. He had been reading Mrs Browning's "Sonnets from the Portuguese" to us in the garden, this very afternoon, and it struck me that in his betrothed's dreamy eyes was a sort of startled wonder and surprise, as of one who hears the murmur of an unseen sea, and marvels at the sound. She had taken the book away with her when we came indoors, and I could not help wondering what she thought of it. These were not fiction, these sonnets in which the poet-wife has enshrined her love—what did the girl think of them who professed to believe that only in fiction could a love like this be found?

But whatever she thought, she kept her thoughts to herself. She could be very reticent, I found, this girl with the fluent tongue, and frank smile, and clear, candid eyes. What she said would be simply and absolutely true, I was sure, but I was becoming very sure also that she would say only as much or as little as she chose.

She was coming down the staircase now, the great central staircase whose finely-wrought balusters were a triumph of metal-workers' skill, and whose white marble steps were relieved by a broad carpeting of crimson velvet. She was in white herself, with no colour about her except the splendour of her eyes and the brilliant hues that fell upon her here and there from the stained glass window half-way up the stairs, but I thought I had never seen so magnificent a creature. Her noble and imperial beauty had never impressed me so before—and this was the girl

who was to marry Richard Hazelford, a man whose life probably held some sinister or shameful secret, and whom I had seen lower his front to the dark-skinned Mirza Khan!

Ought I to tell her what I had seen, and the conclusions I had inevitably drawn? ought I—or ought I not? I could not decide, and I temporised, as women in a difficulty generally do. I would tell her, if once I decided that she should be told—but not yet; certainly not to-day. The colonel was going out this afternoon, I knew, and Dieudonné, as she insisted on my calling her, had arranged to go for a walk with me. For the next few hours at least she would be free from his attentions, and by to-morrow I might have made up my mind.

We went into the park together, but we did not talk much. I was absent and engrossed with perplexing thoughts, and Dieudonné seemed almost as pre-occupied as myself. Were the changeful lights in the dreamy eyes and the tender curves of the beautiful mouth a witness to her absent lover's power? Or had she forgotten his existence, as she seemed to have forgotten mine, and given herself up—as I believed she often did—to vague poetic fancies, and the companionship of the heroes and heroines who peopled her ideal world?

We wandered idly under the spreading trees, but habit brought our steps at last to the little wicket-gate where we had been used to part. The lane that led to the Home Farm lay before us, the Home Farm itself showed through the clustering trees. The evening light fell softly on it, and glorified it to

a sweet and peaceful beauty ; the sunset fell on every rounded stack and turned it into gold. In the lane were cattle going home with a smell of pasture in their fragrant breath, with deep satisfied lowings, with tails lazily whisking away the swarms of gnats, and heads lowered to snatch a mouthful of wayside grass ; a boy clattered after them in huge hob-nailed boots, with face and hair tanned to a level hue, and mouth puckered to a tuneless whistle ; a dog leaped and barked with unexpended energy, and made sudden runs at the hindmost cow, whichever it happened to be, and enjoyed himself as only a dog with something to run at can.

We stood and watched them as they trampled by, with low thud of noiseless hoof, and deep-drawn breathings, and soft, reflective, mildly-inquiring gaze ; and then we heard the voices of returning labourers, and the crack of a carter's whip.

"Basil will be coming soon," I said. "He generally waits till the men have all gone. Do you mind waiting a minute ? It is so long since I saw him—or, at least, it seems so to me."

"He is so busy, is he not ? But what a full life it is ! what a happy one ! If I were a man, it is what I would choose. Beneficent, useful, giving and receiving good—the gracious earth your workshop, and no humbler roof than heaven ! It seems to me the true ideal life."

"I don't think my brother has quite such exalted ideas of his calling," I said, soberly. "It is at least a life that has plenty of trials in it, in times like these."

"Yes—but I don't think he would change it, for all that. He says he knows few in which a man may be so useful and so influential for good. And that is what he cares most about, I think. He would not like to be anything that meant just making money."

I wondered how she had come to know and understand him so well. I felt it was true, though he had never said so much as this to me; and something very like jealousy stirred within me at the thought. Why should he have opened his heart to this girl, who could never be anything to him? I am afraid my voice sounded a little hard as I said, more coldly than I wished—

"You seem to know Basil wonderfully well. I suppose he talks a great deal to you?"

"No," she said, simply, "but I often think over what he says. He is not like any one else—not like the men one meets in society. He is more like a man in a book.

She spoke with a grave simplicity it was impossible not to accept as simply. To have smiled at it would have been as utter an insult as to imagine it meant any more than it professed. No wonder he had lost his heart to a girl so artless and so charming, and who, if she did not return his love, evidently regarded him with admiration. If each had been free, and if their positions had been more equal, how long, I wondered would he have been to her as a "man in a book?"

The troop of labourers had passed us, with coarse hot faces reddened by the sun, and the alternations

of stupid silence and stupider jest with which the British peasant signalises his release from toil. Two or three touched their hats, but the greater part passed us with a stolid indifference, begotten of fatigue. Behind these village heroes, two tall figures came up the lane together, and the next moment Basil was taking off his hat to Miss Temple, and Charlie had cleared the fence, and was giving me a fraternal hug.

"I beg your pardon," he said to Miss Temple, bowing lower than I had ever known Master Charlie do before, "but it's Esther, you see, and I haven't seen her for a month!"

"Are *you* so fond of her, too?" she said, smiling softly—"what a rich happy Esther she is!"

"We are *all* fond of Esther," said my young brother. "The mater—I mean, my mother," corrected boyish Charlie—"is wanting to see her dreadfully. Couldn't you spare her for an hour or two, Miss Temple? I'll undertake to bring her back at any time you like to name."

"Very well. We dine at nine—so there is a good hour yet."

"But you will have to walk back alone," I objected.

"Unless Miss Temple would come with us?" said Basil, flushing like a girl. "The mother would be very glad to see her."

"And I should like to see Mrs Graham," said Miss Temple cordially, as she opened the gate, and came out into the lane.

Could I blame Basil that he lingered behind with her, talking quietly and innocently enough, no doubt,

but perhaps forgetting May in the presence so much sweeter and fairer, and alas! so much more dear? Perhaps I ought to have prevented it, perhaps a more truly loyal sister would have stayed and interrupted the perilous *tête-à-tête*, instead of hurrying on with Charlie under pretence of giving my mother notice of Miss Temple's coming. Perhaps this might have been the truest kindness, but I could not do it. He was my brother, and I loved him so well.

After all, I need not have disquieted myself. If the walk had been sweeter to one—or both—than either might have cared to confess, it had certainly been short. They reached the farm almost as soon as we did, and came into the pretty drawing-room, with its summer garniture of holland and lace, while I was seeking my mother to tell her of her approaching guest.

"Please, Miss Esther, the missis has gone into Hazelford, and won't be back till late," said Mrs Munns, appearing at the door, and dropping innumerable curtsies to Miss Temple.

I knew it was no use waiting, so we prepared to set out. But first, Charlie insisted on showing the garden, gathering all Basil's young geraniums and presenting them to her, while Basil was called off to speak to one of the men; and then Charlie said I must see the new calf that had arrived during my absence, and Miss Temple came with us, stepping daintily over the clean-swept stones and fresh-laid straw, putting her finger into the pretty creature's mouth, and looking almost frightened as she felt the strength with which it drew it in.

"It won't hurt you," said Charlie, scornfully. "If you want to see a beast with some fight in him, come and see Deva! Come! you'll be quite safe if you go with me."

"Where is he taking her?" said Basil, coming up as Charlie walked off with an amusing air of patronage and protection. And, then, before I could answer, he went on—

"That is the sort of dress that May ought to get. I wish she would consult you instead of the Honourable Potts!"

"My dear Basil, I'm afraid you know less about it than Mr Potts. A dress like that would probably cost about half May's allowance."

"Would it! Why, it's only a white gown without frills—the very thing for the country. And those red geraniums Charlie gave her look so well against it."

"Ah! there are gowns and gowns," said I; "and rural simplicity is a costly thing if you order it in Paris."

Basil looked as superior and unconvinced as a man always does when he is too profoundly ignorant of a subject even to understand the arguments advanced against him.

"Where did you say Charlie had taken Miss Temple?" he asked, looking round the now empty space.

"To see Deva, I think——"

"Oh, surely not!" he interrupted. "He knows I don't like any one to go in there."

"Isn't Deva safe?" I began; but already Basil

was half across the yard. I was following, wondering at his excited tone, when a sudden shriek rent the air. A door flew open, something white flashed across my sight, and, with an angry bellow, out rushed the Devon bull, with lowered head, and tail standing straight in the air. Miss Temple did not see us. She was running blindly along, away from the gate that might have saved her, and followed by the infuriated bull.

Charlie had come out after them with a white, distracted face and futile cries. But what could he, what could any of us, do? Already the animal was close upon her, and, as I saw her stumble and fall, I felt that hope was over. The angry brute rushed madly forward. Already she must have felt his breath upon her neck, when, with a shout that made even Deva pause, and lift his red, wicked head with an angry stare, Basil dashed across the yard, and flung himself between them.

I shall never forget the sick horror of that moment. The bull retreated, but only a pace, and charged his new prey with redoubled fury. It was a horrible vision of trampling feet and plunging horns, and though help was nearer than I thought, and men with pitchforks were running from all quarters, I knew that any help they could give must be too late.

I leant sick and trembling against the rails, in a voiceless and almost worldless agony of prayer. If only Basil's life might be spared! "Only his life—only his life!" I gasped.

I absolutely dared not look at what was going on.

I knew somehow that Deva had been overpowered and led back to his stall, but I dared not even think of what might be left behind. Miss Temple and Charlie were kneeling by something—something at which I dared not look—and I knew that if I tried to walk and go to them I must have fallen.

At last I saw people coming towards me, and Basil, my brother, in the midst. "Only his shoulder," I heard some one say, and I think I tried to say "Thank God!" and could not for the choking in my throat, and the sudden mist before my eyes. And then suddenly all was dark, and I knew nothing more.

When I came to myself, I was on the couch in the drawing-room, and Miss Temple, with a face as white as her dress, was bathing my forehead, while Dr Cheriton—who had luckily happened to be at a cottage near—was bending over me with a grave professional gaze.

How he came there I was too confused even to wonder. All I did was to sit up and ask if he ought not to be with Basil, and to faint promptly off again before he could reply.

"Don't you know that fainting people ought to lie down?" asked Dr Cheriton, quite sternly, when I once more opened my eyes. "I thought everybody knew as much as that, between health primers and ambulance classes. Now, you're not to talk! Lie down again, and I'll tell you all you want to know. Ford's all right—or at least he's as right as a man can expect to be with a hole in his arm and a broken rib. Come, you needn't faint again! He'll pull through fast enough, you'll see, though I daresay his

fiddling's spoil for a while. It's the first decent bit of surgery I've had down here, and I'll take care he doesn't spoil my credit."

There was consolation in the cheery voice, and in the doctor's quaint little boast.

"Can I see him?" I asked.

"And I?" said Miss Temple, as Dr Cheriton hesitated. She stood up, and laid her hand on the doctor's arm. "I must see him—I must thank him," she said, earnestly. And then, in a strange, awed whisper—

"Do you know that he saved my life?"

"I am quite aware of it," said Dr Cheriton; "but that is no reason you should do your best to endanger his. No—I won't have him seen by either of you to-night. He's gone to bed, and he's going to stay there. I've left Mrs Munns in charge till Mrs Graham comes back—and, if you'll excuse my saying it, the sooner the house is quiet the better. I've taken the liberty of sending Charlie for Miss Temple's pony-carriage, for I don't think you're either of you very fit for walking home."

I looked at Dieudonné's white face, and felt as if I had been unpardonably forgetful of her own danger, and possible sufferings.

"Are you hurt too?" I asked anxiously, but she shook her head with a smile that was curiously sweet.

"No—he took it all for me."

Her eyes brightened with sudden tears, and she turned away her head.

"There is Mr Graham and the carriage!" exclaimed

Dr Cheriton in a tone of intense relief, and the next moment Charlie came in.

My poor penitent Charlie! How subdued he was! how conscious that his own folly had caused it all! I could not find it in my heart to scold him, richly as I thought he deserved it. But Dr Cheriton had no such compunctions.

"Here is the promising young soldier who thinks it fine to disobey orders," he said, as my poor crest-fallen boy came in. "Here is the sagacious naturalist, who first adorns a young lady with scarlet flowers, and then stirs up a bull with a long pole to draw his attention to her."

"I only wish it had been me instead," said poor Charlie. "Miss Temple, can you ever forgive me?"

"I forgive you now," she said, giving him her hand with the air of a pardoning queen. "I am thankful—as you must be—that it has not become impossible to do so."

It was a curious speech. Charlie stepped back with a puzzled look, and I wondered if Miss Temple felt—as I did—that only Basil's escape made it possible to pardon his brother's reckless folly. She might well feel so, I thought, when Basil had risked his life for hers; but she did not explain herself, and something in the proud silent face made it impossible to ask for an explanation.

Dr Cheriton, who was evidently anxious to get rid of us, took us down to the carriage at once. I would fain have stayed. Surely Miss Temple might have spared me now, I thought—and I longed to be permitted to nurse Basil.

But Dr Cheriton would not hear of it.

"I tell you all he wants is keeping quiet, and Mrs Graham will do that twice as well as you! Besides," he added, while Charlie was putting Miss Temple into the carriage, "I can't let you go off duty yet. A shock like this isn't the most soothing thing for weak nerves, and you may be wanted there. Can't you trust your brother to me, Miss Graham? Don't you know that I care for him as much as—no! a thousand times more than if he were my own?"

"It's very wrong of you if you do," I said bluntly. And then I let him put me in the carriage, and we drove off without further delay.

"We are late—there is Dick looking out for us," said Miss Temple, as we stopped at the great entrance, with its otter-guarded doors.

The doors were flung wide, and a stream of light poured through them. Colonel Hazelford stood at the top of the steps, looking out for us, and the lamp that swung in the massive archway threw its light full upon him.

Miss Temple ran lightly up the steps, and went past him into the house. It seemed to me that he tried to detain her, but without success.

"It is late; I will tell you all about it at dinner," I heard her say; and he stood looking after her with a discomfited expression. Others were late, it seemed, beside ourselves. Lady Avondale's children were just coming in from their evening walk with the French and German governesses, who had charge of their polyglot education. One of the little ones put her hand into mine, stopping me to show me her flowers,

and the other ran up to Colonel Hazelford. She was a pretty little blonde, of five or six years old, but the Colonel pushed her roughly away. Perhaps he had not recovered his good humour since he parted from Mirza Khan, or perhaps he was annoyed with Miss Temple. It did not matter which—no, certainly, it did not matter! It was not any question of the cause of Colonel Hazelford's ill-humour that made me look at him with such sudden and absorbing interest.

All at once, as he stood on the steps in the brilliant light, and pushed away the little fair-haired child, I knew where I had seen him before.

"I know you! I know you!" I cried. "You are Basil's *Uncle Dick*!"





## CHAPTER XXI.

“ON THE WORD OF AN OFFICER.”

“It is the very masterpiece of villainy  
To smooth the brow, and to outface suspicion.”

—Howard.

**Y**ES, I knew him at last—Basil’s “Uncle Dick!” The man who stood on the steps of Hazelford Castle to-night, with the lamplight falling bright upon his face, was the man I had seen in the brilliant light of an Indian sun twenty years ago, on the steps of Government House. The long whiskers were gone, the hair had turned a little grey, the face was furrowed and lined, but the young officer of my childish remembrance lived again in the cold blue eyes, in the ungracious repulse, in the hateful sarcastic smile.

I ran up the steps in uncontrollable excitement.

“I know you!” I panted again. “You are Basil’s Uncle Dick!”

Colonel Hazelford put his glass in his eye, and stared at me in apparently amused surprise.

“I will be anybody’s uncle you please,” he said blandly, “if you will evince as sweet an interest in me, Miss Graham, as you are honouring me with just

now. As for my claims to it, I fear they are rather—shaky. I regret to say that I have not a nephew or a niece in the world.”

“But surely you had once,” I persisted. “Don’t you remember the little boy who ran up to you, and called you Uncle Dick, on the steps of Government House in Calcutta, twenty years ago?”

His face changed. He did remember—I saw he did. But all he said was—

“My dear Miss Graham, I seem an old fogey to you, I’ve no doubt, but I haven’t quite such a pre-historic memory as that! Twenty years? It’s quite painful to think of remembering anything that happened so long ago. I couldn’t do it, even to oblige so charming a young lady as yourself.”

“Try!” I exclaimed. “Surely if I can remember it, you can. Think of the steps at Government House, and the little fair-haired child! You remember him, Colonel Hazelford. Oh, I am sure you must—you *do*! The little fair-haired boy who called you Uncle Dick!”

I think Colonel Hazelford was going to disclaim all remembrance once more, when an unexpected ally came to my aid. Mirza Khan glided from one of the pillars in the hall, as the young officer’s servant had glided from the shadow of the pillars of Government House.

“I think the Sahib remembers,” said the Indian, showing his teeth in significant smile. “I was also there, Sahib—I, Mirza Khan!”

“Dog! be silent!” cried the Colonel, with a furious gesture.

I began to tremble, in dread of another scene. But if the Colonel forgot his manners before strangers, his servant had apparently more self-control.

"Pardon, Sahib," he said, spreading out his hands in a deprecating manner, and bowing almost to the ground. He vanished as silently as he had come, but Colonel Hazelford could not recover his self-command. He stood biting his lip, and pulling at his moustache with a hand that visibly shook, and looked quite alarmed as the Earl came into the hall.

"Not a word before Otterbourne," he whispered rapidly. "I think I do recall the incident you speak of—but I can explain nothing here. I will see you after dinner. And meanwhile, are you not more than a little late?"

I hurried away, as much to conceal my agitation as to change my dress. I was on the verge of some great discovery, I felt sure. If Colonel Hazelford was not Basil's uncle, at least he knew something of him—at least, he could tell me who my brother was. Basil, my dear Basil, would have a name and a place in the world at last!

I went into dinner with this thought singing in my heart, and marvelled to see Mirza Khan, calm and imperturbable as ever, behind his master's chair. How much or how little did this man know? and what was the secret of his power over his hot-tempered master?

The dinner seemed unusually long and tedious. Lady Otterbourne did not appear. Lady Avondale made talk with the Earl, and Colonel Hazelford with me. Miss Temple sat silent, in a languid

abstraction her recent escape might be held to excuse.

The Earl seemed too much moved at her peril even to discuss it. He listened to Lady Avondale's society gossip, but every now and then he put out his hand and gently touched his ward's, and I felt how much the tender little action expressed.

"Have you seen the conservatory lighted up?" Colonel Hazelford asked me, as we got up from table. "I should like to show it you presently, if you will permit me."

Of course I guessed that the explanation I was longing for was to be given there. I bowed assent, for I felt too agitated to speak.

It was not long before he came for me, but when we entered the beautiful house, with its feathery palms and trailing creepers and gorgeous pyramids of bloom, we did not even make a pretence of looking at the flowers.

"You want to know if I remember that little scene in Calcutta, Miss Graham? I do remember it, now. But will you tell me why you are so interested to know?" said Colonel Hazelford, stopping short before we were half-way down the centre walk.

"Why!" I exclaimed. "But surely you know that? It is because the child you disowned then, but whom I cannot help thinking you knew, is my brother, my brother Basil. Oh! Colonel Hazelford, if he is your nephew I beseech you tell me. You need not think he would trouble you. He has friends, a home, a career—everything but a name! If you will tell me who he is, it is all I ask. It is

all that Basil himself would ask if he were here. And you know—I am sure you know !”

I was too eager to choose my words, or even to notice their effect. It was only when I stopped, and no answer came, that I saw how strangely Colonel Hazelford was looking at me. His face was white and livid, his eyes had a dumb fury in them that seemed to chill my blood. Suddenly he pulled himself together with a short disdainful laugh.

“So that is your story, is it ?” he said. “I warn you that neither you nor he will gain anything by it.”

For a moment I was too much astounded to speak, and I think my surprise in some way mollified the angry man before me.

“I beg your pardon—I ought not to have said that,” he said, in more conciliatory tones. “I think I did not quite understand you. You ask me to tell you your brother’s name, and I suppose you mean Mr Ford ?”

“Yes, my brother Basil, whom we call Ford: who, we have sometimes thought, might be the son of that Trumpeter Ford of whom you once spoke—but whose real name we have never known.”

“And do you mean to say that young Ford—the Earl’s sub-agent, the man settled here at his very gates—is the boy I saw on the steps of Government House ?”

“He is that very boy—the boy my mother saved when she escaped from Sooltapoor.”

“Hush !” he said, looking quickly round ; “there is no need to mention names. This is all you have

to tell me, is it? Before I say anything, I should like to hear your story to the end."

"This is all," I answered briefly. I did not think it necessary to tell Colonel Hazelford how Basil was rescued, or the awful price my mother paid for the unknown child she saved. It was Basil I was thinking of—Basil, my living brother—not the little dead sister who was to me only a name and an empty memory. Mothers keep their dead children alive in their hearts for ever, but I was not Nelly's mother, and Basil was more to me now than the sister I had lost so long ago.

Colonel Hazelford was walking up and down the long conservatory as if he had forgotten my existence. Dimly as it was lighted, I could see that his face was pale, and his brows knit. He seemed, indeed, quite lost in thought, and I could only wait till he came out of his reverie. Up and down he paced, for I did not dare to interrupt him, and by degrees I saw his brow clear. Quite suddenly he stopped, and stood before me.

"Miss Graham, I will tell you all I know, and I hope I shall be able to clear myself of the very questionable conduct you have attributed to me. The child who spoke to me that day was probably not so entire a stranger to me as I thought. My nephew he certainly was not. I was an only child, and have neither nephews nor nieces—as you can easily satisfy yourself from Debrett, if you doubt my word. But in those days I was fond of children, and half the youngsters in the regiment called me Uncle Dick. It is likely enough that the boy you rescued

belonged to my old regiment—part of which, I know, perished in the massacre we have all such sad cause to remember : it is likely enough that he knew me, though I had forgotten him. His name I cannot tell you, for I do not know it. I did not know it then, and I do not know it now. Very possibly he may be poor old Ford's son—he had a boy about that age, I remember. This is all I know, and therefore this is all I can tell you. If it would be any satisfaction to you, I could hunt up some of Ford's old comrades—”

“Thank you,” I said, faintly. From Colonel Hazelford's nephew to Trumpeter Ford's son was a descent for which Basil's sister could not be warmly grateful.

“I trust I may consider that I have exonerated myself—if anything in my conduct seemed to need exoneration?” said Colonel Hazelford, stiffly.

“Yes—of course—if you are *quite, quite* sure you did not know him when you saw him in Calcutta—” I stammered, a good deal ashamed of the ungracious doubt. But I had hoped so much, and been so bitterly disappointed. It was, of course, impossible really to doubt Colonel Hazelford's word ; yet I think if he had not told me he had once been fond of children, I should have found it easier to believe him. He looked at me a little sternly.

“I have told you so already, Miss Graham. I can only repeat it with such emphasis as I may. On the word of an officer and an English gentleman, I did not know the child.”

He bowed coldly, as perhaps I deserved, and offered me his arm to take me back into the house. Was it my fancy that I heard a low, smothered laugh ? I turned quickly, and saw something dark gliding behind

the flowers, and then I felt sure that our interview had been overheard, and overheard by Mirza Khan.

It is impossible to describe the repulsion I felt at the thought, or the perplexity with which it filled me. I seemed hedged about with mysteries and surprises, perhaps with falsehood and fraud. But as I looked at Colonel Hazelford I did not think he would have told me a formal and deliberate falsehood. "On the word of an officer and an English gentleman"—it seemed impossible to doubt a statement attested by words like these.

We went into the house together, silently enough, and found that Miss Temple had already retired. The drawing-room was empty, and the distant tones of a violin showed that Lord Otterbourne had gone to the music-room or to his wife's boudoir. I wished Colonel Hazelford good-night, and went upstairs at once.

Miss Temple's dressing-room was a charming apartment, furnished with everything that could please a girl's fancy, and opening into a tiny conservatory, in the centre of which stood a white marble bath, shaped like an enormous shell. To-night the door that communicated with the bedroom was shut, and concluding that Miss Temple had retired to rest, I sat down in the dressing-room, not sorry to be alone and able to think over the events of the day. So much had happened that my brain seemed in a whirl of excitement. Connected thought I found impossible. As in a dream, I went again through all that had filled the busy hours ; as in a dream, I was walking in fancy in the park with Ellinor Dieudonné Temple ; watching in a second anguish of suspense the encounter with Deva ; rejoicing again over Basil's

safety; seeing once more in Colonel Hazelford the "Uncle Dick" of Calcutta memories; hearing, and only half believing, his subsequent denial.

It must have been quite an hour before I roused myself, and then, before I began to undress, I opened the bedroom door, and peeped gently in. Miss Temple was sleeping, and I stood a few minutes looking at her, and thinking what a lovely picture she made, as she lay in her luxurious nest of down and lace. One white hand and arm was thrown above her head, and the other lay on the scarcely whiter coverlet, but perhaps the position was more graceful than easy. She moaned and murmured in her sleep, tossing restlessly on her soft lawn pillows, and uttering disjointed words.

"For me—it was for *me*!" she murmured once. What was she dreaming of? I wondered. A soft flush tinted her cheek, an exquisite smile curved her lip. And then her brows contracted with an expression of pain, she uttered a low wailing moan. "I cannot—oh I cannot!" she cried. She threw her arms out wildly, and sat up, and looked at me with a strange glassy stare.

I thought of Dr Cheriton's prophetic warning, and summoned all my courage. I had never been with a sleep-walker before, and though I had not thought I should be frightened, a cold nervous terror laid hold of me against my will. That Dr Cheriton's prophecy was coming true I felt sure, and I was not mistaken.

Miss Temple got up and walked to the door, apparently seeing as well as I could, but with her eyes fixed in that strange glassy stare. She passed into the dressing-room, felt for the key of the ladies' door,

which had been used to hang there, but which Dr Cheriton had ordered to be removed, paused a moment, as if at fault, and then opened the door of the room, and went out on to the landing. I followed her, trembling in spite of myself, but resolved to fulfil my charge. "Follow her, but don't wake her," had been the doctor's brief directions, and I was determined that, frightened or not, I would carry them out implicitly.

Miss Temple went on barefoot, and clad only in the fine filmy night-dress that must have been so poor a protection against the cold of the bitter winter night when first I had seen the "ghost." No wonder she had been ill after a walk like that! Warm as it was to-night, I snatched a shawl from the dressing-room and threw it round her shoulders, and then I prepared to follow wherever she might lead. Swiftly and noiselessly she glided across the landing, and down the flight of stairs that led to the ladies' door. She tried it, but, as I expected, it was locked. I hoped she would return to her room on finding her purpose baffled, but after a moment's pause, she turned down a corridor that led into the hall. All was in darkness there, except that through the central window came a wide shaft of silver light. The other windows were all closed and barred, but through this the moonlight streamed, cutting the darkness like a knife, and showing the very patterns of the gorgeous Eastern carpets, and the veinings of the marbles on which it fell.

And in the centre of the hall, with the moonlight full upon their faces, stood Colonel Hazelford and Mirza Khan.



## CHAPTER XXII.

### A MOONLIGHT MEETING.

“Strange state of being ! (for 'tis still to be)  
Senseless to feel, and with closed eyes to see.”—*Byron.*

COLONEL HAZELFORD and his servant were so absorbed in their conversation that they evidently neither saw us, nor dreamt that their colloquy had been interrupted. Instinctively I stopped short the moment I saw them, and held Miss Temple back. Whether she saw them or not, I could not tell. I have heard since, from Dr Cheriton, that somnambulists do not see, but the open eyes and precise certainty of movement conveyed the impression of sight. She made no effort to escape my restraining hand, until I would have drawn her back into the corridor ; then she shook it off impatiently, and stood just within the door.

A large oaken screen partly sheltered us, but even without this we should scarcely have been seen. My own dress was dark, and so was the shawl I had thrown round Miss Temple, and the corner in which we stood was plunged in all the depth of shadow which moonlight casts. I was glad to notice this ; and as I could not induce Miss Temple to leave the

hall, I consoled myself with the hope that we should remain undiscovered, especially as both Colonel Hazelford and Mirza Khan appeared too engrossed to have eyes or ears for anything but their own affairs.

It was evidently no common interview we had so accidentally interrupted, but I had no compunction in staying, for their conversation was carried on entirely in Hindustani—a language of which I only retained sufficient remembrance to know when I heard it spoken. I had understood it as a child, like all Anglo-Indian children, but disuse had so enfeebled memory, that though I recognised a word here and there, their discourse was as unintelligible to me as if they had spoken in Chinese. The tenor of it I could guess from their looks and gestures, but of the subject I could not even form an idea. That the servant was imperative and insolent was as plain as that the master was even abjectly conciliatory. There seemed to be some question of money in dispute, Colonel Hazelford turning out notes and coin from his purse, and Mirza Khan shaking his head with infinite contempt. The Colonel's tone was humble and persuasive, the lacquey's arrogant and minatory; and it seemed to me that the more insolent Mirza Khan became, the more earnest and entreating was the usually haughty Colonel.

I turned to Miss Temple, wondering if she could see her lover, and what she thought of the humiliating spectacle; but her eyes were blank, and no doubt sightless as before. Yet that in some mysterious way she was cognizant of the scene before her I

could not but think. Her face was alive with keenest interest ; her whole being seemed concentrated in the effort to hear and understand. That she did understand seemed evident. There was not, indeed, the wounded feeling, nor even the scornful repulsion, that the sight of Colonel Hazelford in so undignified a position might have been expected to produce in a girl so proud as Ellinor Dieudonnée Temple, but a great eagerness and vivid excitement, as of one who hears something so new and strange that surprise and interest swallow up all merely personal feelings. Dim as the light that reached us was, it was enough to show me this, and I looked with renewed interest at Colonel Hazelford and Mirza Khan.

They were speaking in Hindustani still, but Miss Temple's strained attention seemed to show that she understood it. When or how she could have learnt it seemed difficult to divine, till I remembered that the Earl had at one time been in India, and that the Indian valet had possibly kept up her knowledge of his native tongue. But whatever the source of her knowledge, her interest in the discussion going on left no doubt of her comprehension. It was all dumb show to me, but I divined that the disputants were becoming more pacific. The Colonel's arguments or his money prevailed. Mirza Khan pocketed the notes and gold he had so scornfully refused, and they parted at last quite amicably, the Colonel nodding a pleasant good-night, and Mirza Khan salaaming almost to the ground.

Miss Temple uttered a low sigh as they left the hall. Her wide blank eyes turned to mine ; words

quivered half inaudibly through her lips. "If the Earl only knew, and—*Basil*."

She said no more, and suffered me to lead her quietly back to bed, but she had said enough. What would not Basil have given to have heard his name uttered thus, with the shy suggestive pause before it, and the indescribably tender intonation? It was just a name unwittingly pronounced in a girl's unconscious dreaming, but from that hour I never doubted that my brother's love was returned. I knew it with swift and absolute knowledge, but whether the knowledge was pleasure or pain I could not even tell.

My first impulse was a great gladness, for my dear Basil's sake—and then a stab of uncontrollable pain. It seemed to put him so far from me—so far, so far!—to come between us as his love for May had never done. That had hurt me once, but I knew it now for what it was—a boyish liking, a musician's sympathy, an artist's admiration, a poet's dream—something too intangible and unsubstantial to separate us, or even to last. Through it all, my brother's hand had clasped mine still—but this? I knew that this was a queen who would brook no rival, a love too absorbing to leave room even for a sister's humble claims. My brother was gone from me for ever, I felt with a jealous sorrow of which I was ashamed; but even for himself, could I—or ought I—to be glad? Bound as both he and Dieudonné were, could their love bring them anything but misery? Each would soon have new duties and new ties, and I knew well how faithful to duty each would

be—but to loyal souls can any misery be sharper than half-kept vows and disloyal thoughts ?

“God grant he may never know !” was the prayer that sprang to my lips. So long as he did not know, forgetting might be possible for both—and surely forgetting was the one thing that could make happiness possible for either.

It was bright daylight long before sleep closed my eyes, and when I woke I felt that it was late indeed. Miss Temple’s bed was vacant, and as I sprang up with the guilty feeling which over-sleeping oneself induces, I heard the great clock in the hall booming out eleven.

I dressed quickly, and went to Miss Temple’s boudoir. A dainty little breakfast was awaiting me, but Dieudonnée herself was not there.

“Do you know how Miss Temple is ?” I asked her maid.

“Mademoiselle ver well—she is wiz de Earl, and left you her lofe,” said Fifine, who considered her English much better than my French, as perhaps it was—though, with the bread on the table, the last remark sounded a little ambiguous. However, I accepted the love, helped myself to the wheaten loaf, and got through my breakfast as quickly as I could.

“If Miss Temple asks for me, will you say I have gone to the Home Farm ?” I asked Fifine ; and then I put on my hat, and went across the park to see how Basil was, and felt for once heartily glad to see Dr Cheriton’s yellow gig standing at the gate.

Above any desire to know how Miss Temple was this morning, or how the Colonel and Mirza Khan

would comport themselves after the night they had all spent so strangely, was my ardent anxiety on Basil's account. Dr Cheriton had made light of his injuries last night ; but how much of that might not be due to his desire to spare us anxiety or pain ?

However, there was nothing but good news for me. Basil had passed a good night, and had no more fever than might naturally be expected.

"There's nothing like antiseptic dressing !" said Dr Cheriton, enthusiastically ; "and Mrs Munns is a jewel of a nurse—she does as she's told, and never muddles things by thinking for herself ! Of all unpardonable sins in a woman—and especially in a nurse—thinking for herself is the most unpardonable !"

"Then you think he is better—you think he will really get well ?" I said, with a little gush of joyful tears. I was unnerved and upset, and I have no doubt they did me good ; but Dr Cheriton looked quite put out.

"Get well ? Why, of course he will get well," he cried. "I told you so yesterday, didn't I ? My dear Miss Graham, don't, *don't*, I implore you ! If I'd said he *wouldn't*, there might be some sense in it ; but—oh, Miss Graham ! if you can love a brother like this—"

"Have you been to the Castle yet ?" I interrupted quickly.

But indeed I would have asked him if he had been to Kamtschatka if I had thought it at all more likely to stop him. He stopped, as it was, looking rather hurt, for which I was sorry—but it seemed to me

then that anything was better than letting him go on.

"I don't think I shall go there to-day. It will scarcely be necessary, as I can see you here," he said in a pained voice, that made me feel quite guilty and uncomfortable.

And then my mother came in, and asked me if I would like to see Basil, and everything else faded out of my thoughts. It was only when I came down again, and found Dr Cheriton still patiently waiting for my "report," that I remembered to tell him of the eventful night I had passed. I said nothing of Colonel Hazelford or Mirza Khan. Whatever that meeting meant, it was nothing that concerned Dr Cheriton; but I felt he ought to know of Miss Temple's somnambulism.

He was scarcely so impressed as I expected.

"It is a condition very liable to return, and the shock she had yesterday was distinctly a predisposing cause. I will try and see her this afternoon, but I have an urgent case waiting for me at Coombe, and I ought to have been there half-an-hour ago."

He had stayed to see me, I knew, and I felt both sorry and ashamed to think that he should have done so. I ought not to have forgotten to give him my daily report of Miss Temple, if indeed it was that he waited for—and if not, I was only the more ashamed. It always seems to me that the pride which some women take in their "conquests" is as incomprehensible as it is unwomanly. How can any one take pleasure in what must mean a fellow-creature's pain? And when it meant the pain of so good and worthy a

man as Dr Cheriton, I was far too sorry to have room for any other feeling. I could not charge myself with having ever given him intentional encouragement, but I feared I had not been as guarded and as careful as I ought. Circumstances had thrown us so much together, that it had been difficult to avoid intimacy; and my liking for him was so genuine that I had not considered the danger of his taking it for more than it was worth.

I watched him drive away with quite a feeling of remorse, and then I set out on my return to the Castle soberly enough. Basil indeed was better, and that was a solid piece of gladness to set against minor worries, but perhaps the release from anxiety on his behalf only left me free to dwell upon them. As I went along under the welcome shade of clustered elm and beech, and mighty solitary oak, I found myself thinking of the words Miss Temple had uttered in her sleep, and finding a strange new meaning in them.

"If the Earl knew, and—*Basil!*" This was what she had said, and it seemed to me, as I thought it over, that the revelation of her feelings was only a part—and perhaps a comparatively unimportant part—of the true meaning of her words. Did they not show also that Colonel Hazelford and Mirza Khan had been discussing something which concerned both the Earl of Otterbourne and my brother Basil?

What it could be I could not even conjecture. Imagination failed to suggest a common ground of interest—music always excepted—and I did not think that music had formed any part of the discus-

sion between Colonel Hazelford and Mirza Khan. I could not forget that, unless my suspicions wronged him greatly, Colonel Hazelford knew more than he would admit about Basil. That he was the man whom Basil had called "Uncle Dick" he had already admitted; and though he had denied all further knowledge, as I recalled the scene of last night, I felt that—officer and gentleman as he was—his word was scarcely above suspicion.

But however much I might suspect, I could do nothing. I could only wait till I could see Miss Temple, and perhaps learn from her the true meaning of the interview we had witnessed together, and which she, at least, had seemed to understand.





## CHAPTER XXIII.

### FRIENDS IN COUNCIL.

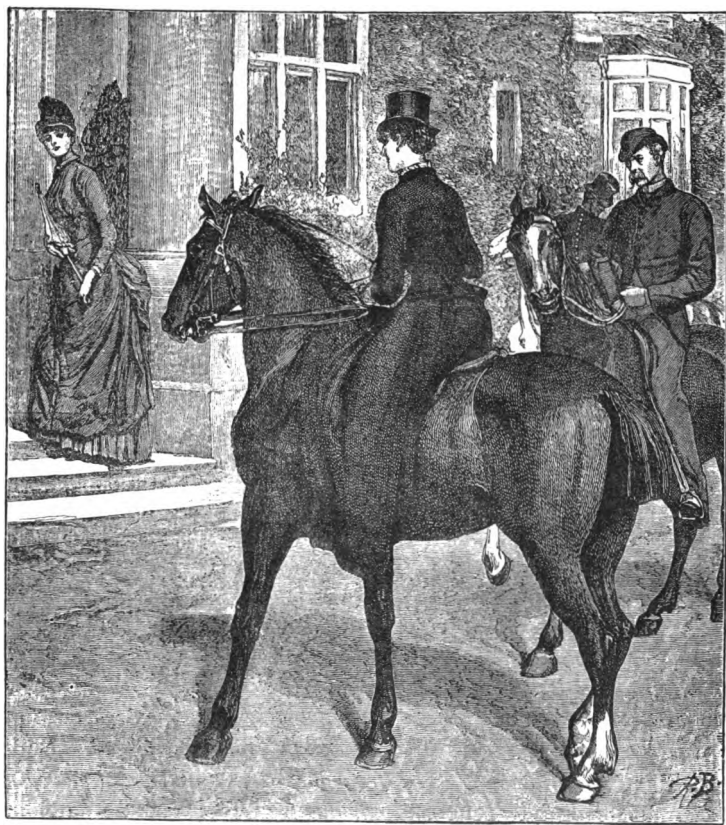
“The noblest part of a friend is an honest boldness in the notifying of errors.”—*Feltham*.

MISS TEMPLE, I found, was still closeted with the Earl. Her horse was waiting at the great entrance, and Lady Avondale and Colonel Hazelford were already mounted, and holding in their fidgeting horses with some difficulty.

“I wish Nora would come,” said Colonel Hazelford, as I approached them. “Miss Graham, have you any idea how long she will be, or if she means to ride this morning?”

I had, of course, no opinion to offer, but at that moment a servant announced that Miss Temple hoped Lady Avondale and Colonel Hazelford would not wait for her, as she was still engaged with the Earl. The groom led her horse away, and the others rode off, Lady Avondale laughing and the Colonel looking a good deal annoyed.

I went up the steps and into the hall—the hall that was full of warmth and sunlight now, but that recalled so vividly the scene that had been enacted in it only twelve hours ago. Here was the spot where Colonel



"LADY AVONDALE AND COLONEL HAZELFORD WERE ALREADY MOUNTED.

*Page 242.*



Hazelford and Mirza Khan had stood ; there the corner, with its oaken screen, whence we had watched them unobserved. Lady Avondale's children were running about, playing hide-and-seek, while their governesses wrangled as to where they should go for their morning walk. I was glad when they settled it at last, and called the children away.

They had scarcely gone when the door of the Earl's room opened, and Miss Temple came out, looking pale and excited, and visibly struggling with emotion. I ran anxiously to her, but the next instant I drew back. Lord Otterbourne was with her, and his face was stern as I had never seen it before.

I had drawn back so quickly that he had not even seen me. He went on speaking to his ward.

"You are not a Hazelford, it is true, but you have lived with Hazelfords long enough to understand the dishonour of a broken pledge!" said the Earl, with cold displeasure.

He went back into the room, and shut the door, and Miss Temple leant against it, white and trembling.

"What shall I do?" she exclaimed. "Oh, Esther, Esther! what shall I do?"

I knew too little to advise, and could only beseech her to tell me what her trouble was.

"I couldn't," she said, with a swift sudden blush. "And if I did, you would not understand. You would think me as foolish and as wrong as he does."

She looked round nervously, almost as if she feared to see Lord Otterbourne re-appear.

"Come into the park," I entreated; "we cannot

talk here. Come and tell me just as much or as little as you like. There is not much fear that I shall think anything *you* do either foolish or wrong."

I am not a flatterer, I hope. Ordinarily I do not praise my friends to their faces, or treat them even to such implicit commendation as this. But I saw that she had been wounded to the quick, that the Earl's censure had hurt her pride as much as her deep affection for him. I wished to show her that there was at least one who believed in her, who felt that, Hazelford or not, she would never do anything unworthy even of a Hazelford *pur sang*.

She gave me a look of affection and trust, and let me have my way. So we went out into the solitude of the wide green park, with its dark leafy glades, its sunny slopes, its vast cool shadows trembling on the grass. Birds were singing all about us, linnets and finches making the underwood musical, the notes of many larks throbbing in the blue above us, blackbirds beginning again and again the song they never finish, a thrush singing loud and clear on a bough close by. We had chosen our favourite seat, a mossy bank that reared itself against the bole of a giant oak. The Castle was out of sight, and except for the chimneys of the Home Farm showing through the trees, we might have been a hundred miles from any human habitation. No sounds came to us but the singing of the birds, the murmurous hum of insects, the faint distant roll of the waves upon the beach.

I looked round with the sigh of satisfaction which seems one's instinctive tribute of praise in a scene of perfect loveliness, but Miss Temple did not echo it,

Her thoughts were not free for the enjoyment of natural beauty. Her face was still pale and disturbed, her eyes were sombre and full of pain; she was silent, but I knew that pride and love were bleeding inwardly. I felt that to make her speak would be the truest kindness.

"Why is Lord Otterbourne angry with you?" I asked, going straight to the point, as I felt was the best way with one whose reserve was so much more pride than shyness. Shyness may be wooed with soft and indirect approach, but pride must be taken by storm.

"You heard what he said?" she exclaimed, with a look at once startled and relieved.

"I heard, but I did not quite understand. What did he mean by broken pledges? Did he mean anything about your engagement to Colonel Hazelford? Is that the pledge you want to break?"

She looked at me earnestly.

"If it were so—what would you think of me?"

"I should be very glad," I declared, with perfect truth.

"You would not think it wrong to break a pledge like that?"

"It would depend on the reason," I said stoutly.

"I believe you would not do it without a strong one, and a good one too."

"Thank you!"—giving my hand a grateful squeeze. "I wish the Earl could think so too." Then, after a pause—"You are not as surprised as he was. I could hardly make him understand, and you guessed at once! How was that, Esther? How did you know?"

She looked at me curiously, but I made no reply. Decidedly, it was not convenient to tell her. Could I say that, all unconsciously, she had betrayed her secret to me,—that I knew she could not marry Richard Hazelford because she loved Basil Ford? I could not say it, guiltless as I was of any intentional intrusion on her confidence, or even of unwarrantable curiosity. I could not have shamed her out of her own mouth—for so I felt she would regard that innocent self-betrayal.

“Have you told Colonel Hazelford?” I asked.

“No—oh no! I have promised the Earl to say nothing to him till to-night. I wanted Lord Otterbourne to speak to him for me, but he will not. He is angry, as you saw.”

“He will not be angry with you long, I think. He loves you too well for that.”

“But that only makes it worse of me!” she said sorrowfully. “It is so ungrateful, so wrong, I know. I thought I could have done anything for him—and so I could, anything but this!”

“But surely he would not wish you to marry against your own desire? If you do not love Colonel Hazelford——”

“But it is my promise he thinks of, and I know that he is right. It is not one’s feelings that ought to decide it—it is what would be right or wrong.”

“But is it not often just one’s feelings that make the difference between right and wrong?”

“Oh no!—how can they? When you think of all I owe to Lord Otterbourne, it must be right for me to do as he wishes.”

"Undoubtedly—so long as he wishes what is right."

"If you knew him as well as I do, you would understand how impossible it would be for him to wish anything else."

"I am sure it would—that is, I am sure he would not wilfully or intentionally wish you to do wrong. But we were talking of feelings, of love and marriage, concerning which no other person can wisely—or even rightly—judge. I think—yes, I am sure—that Lord Otterbourne is wrong if he wishes you to keep a promise that, it seems to me, ought never to have been given."

"No," she agreed. "Only I saw the Earl wished it—and I did not know."

The mournful voice trailed off into silence, but the incomplete, yet pathetic confession, had told me much. No, she had not known, I doubted if she knew even yet!

I thought it quite possible that she knew actually less of her own feelings than I did—that she contented herself with admitting that she did not love Colonel Hazelford, without stooping her pride to inquire too curiously into the reason. No doubt her rescue from Deva had taught her much, but I thought the broken exclamations of her dream might easily express more than her waking hours allowed. In one way sleep is a great revealer. Wild and fantastic as are the images it brings before us, unreal and impossible as the scenes it shows, in one thing it never deceives. Self-interest, or custom, or an honest striving after sweet peace and charity may blind us to dislike;

ignorance of our own hearts, or pride, a lovers' diffidence, or a maiden's modesty, may blind us to love : but sleep tears away the flimsy veil. In the strange phantasmagoria of our dreams the unconfessed animosity is admitted, the hidden love stands revealed.

How much of last night's dreaming she remembered now, I could not tell—nor, on this point at least, did I seek to inquire. It was not for me to pry into her feelings, or force her to confession. Later I would try and find out how far she remembered the strange meeting of Colonel Hazelford and Mirza Khan, but of her feelings towards my brother there was no need to speak. If her marriage with Colonel Hazelford could be averted, it was best that she should remain unconscious of the chief reason against it—supposing that such unconsciousness was still possible for her.

So I spoke no word of Basil, and that as much for his sake as for hers. He had gone too far with May Fielding to draw back with honour now—I felt that as strongly as himself. And indeed, whatever Ellinor Dieudonnée Temple might feel for him, and had he been ever so free to offer her his hand, I knew well enough that the Earl's ward could not have taken it. It was best, truly, that neither should know—that Dieudonnée should not dream that her love was returned, that Basil should think her indifferent still. Every one says that unrequited love dies quickly of inanition, and though I doubted the fact, I had not sufficient experience to controvert it. Nothing could have changed my love for Basil, I knew—but then, that was like a sister's, and did not count, and thank God, it was not unrequited.

I spoke no word of Basil, but even without that, I felt my case strong. A loveless marriage could not but be wrong, and though I saw that Miss Temple was more than half inclined to obey the Earl's wishes and sacrifice her own feelings, I combated her purpose with all my strength.

"It cannot be right to do wrong," I contended, and I stuck to my point manfully—or womanfully, which, Dr Cheriton says, implies a greater tenacity, as being less liable to be disturbed by argument. But here I felt that the force of argument was all on my side. There was on hers absolutely nothing but a mistaken code of honour, and what someone has called "a woman's enthusiasm for self-sacrifice." But if I could help it, the girl whom Basil loved should not sacrifice herself.

"Better a little pain than a long one," I urged. "Better a small wrong now than one that would only end with your life. If Colonel Hazelford loves you, would he be any happier than you? If he really loves you, he will give you up, and whatever he feels now, he will come to thank you for sparing him misery as much as yourself."

Miss Temple smiled bitterly.

"Do you think he cares in that way? People in society don't talk as you do, Esther—I doubt if they often feel so. I don't think Colonel Hazelford cares very much whether I love him in your way or not, but he cares a great deal about marrying Lord Otterbourne's heiress—and perhaps it would not be fair to disappoint him."

"Well," said I, "all I can say is, that if those are

his motives the sooner he is disappointed the better ! But if you think he is a man like that, I understand less than ever how you could consent to an engagement with him."

"I did not know—I did not understand," she faltered. "I liked him very well, and I thought that was enough. I knew the Earl wished it, and I thought I should not mind. You see it was all two years ago, before I ever—before we came to England. How could I tell *then* ?" She stopped short, blushing furiously, and I changed the subject out of very pity. She had risen to go, and I rose also and walked by her side.

"Did you have a good night ?" I asked, as carelessly as I could. I was very anxious to know if she remembered anything of the scene we had witnessed together, of the conversation she had wished the Earl to know of—"and Basil !" But I did not venture to allude more directly to it, as Dr Cheriton had enjoined me never to tell Miss Temple when she walked in her sleep.

"Not so good as you did," she said, with a smile. "I left you sound asleep when I went downstairs. I don't think I could have slept very well—I felt so tired this morning, and I know I had bad dreams."

"Bad dreams ? Do you remember what about ?" I asked, with an eagerness I could hardly conceal.

"No, I don't remember, or at least not clearly. It was something about Dick, I know. I thought he was going to do something wrong—really wrong and wicked, I mean. Poor fellow ! it was because I had been feeling so strongly that I could not marry him, I suppose."

"And you don't remember anything else?"

"Not clearly," she said, looking puzzled and uneasy. "I think Mirza Khan was in it too. They were going to do something together. But after all, it does not matter. It was only a dream!"

She little thought how much more than a dream it was, and I did not dare to tell her. Even if I had done so, I think she could have told me no more. A faint and confused remembrance was evidently all she had retained. One point, however, I could clear up, whether she remembered her dream or not; and the value of her remembrance all depended on it.

"You understand Hindustani, don't you?" I said. "I suppose it is having an Indian servant in the house that has kept up your knowledge of it."

Miss Temple looked at me in manifest surprise.

"Do you mean Siva?" she said, with a puzzled look. "Siva always speaks to me in English. I should not understand him if he spoke in Hindustani. I knew it when I was little, of course, but I don't remember a single word."





## CHAPTER XXIV.

### A QUIET WEEK.

“ We often see against some storm,  
A silence in the heavens.”—*Shakespeare.*

**M**ISS GRAHAM, would you like to see the new orchid ?” said Lady Avondale, coming to me as I sat, a little by myself, in a corner of the drawing-room after dinner.

I did not care for orchids, whether new or old, any more than I cared for Lady Avondale’s society, but I assented at once. Lord Otterbourne had gone to his wife’s boudoir, and there was an oppression in the atmosphere—the silent oppression that suggests disturbance in the moral as much as in the physical world. I was glad to escape from it, from Colonel Hazelford’s forced gaiety, and even from Miss Temple’s abstracted and uneasy looks.

I remembered that she had promised the Earl to say nothing to Colonel Hazelford till to-night—but to-night had come, and no doubt she felt that something must be said. For weal or woe, her future would be decided, and I could do nothing to help her—nothing but go away with Lady Avondale, and make it possible for her to speak.

The orchid-house opened out of the conservatory, and for a while we contented ourselves with admiring the quaint forms and gorgeous colours.

"I adore orchids," said Lady Avondale, who "adored" anything that was fashionable with impartial docility. "They are so delightfully *bizarre*, don't you think?"

"Yes," I agreed; "but I could never be very fond of them. A flower without scent always seems to me like a body without a soul."

"Oh, they are lovely!" she protested. "Everybody has them now—that is, everybody who is anybody, you know. Of course it is an acquired taste, but there is something delightfully exclusive about it. Only people of means and refinement can indulge in it. Avondale says our orchid-house costs as much as a stud of horses, but it isn't to compare to this."

"I suppose not," I assented.

"Not half the size, you know—but of course Avondale House is a mere nutshell by the side of Hazelford Castle. What a pity it seems that the Earl has no direct heir. I do so dislike Colonel Hazelford."

"Do you?" I said, a good deal astonished at this sudden outburst. "I thought you seemed to get on with him so well."

"Oh, he is pleasant enough, but I cannot like him; and I don't believe the Earl does either."

"But surely he must, if he lets his ward be engaged to him."

"I daresay he feels, as I do, that there is no valid reason for disliking him—or rather I doubt if the

Earl knows as much as I do about him. Avondale hears things at the clubs, and he says there are all sorts of stories about him. But the Earl goes nowhere and hears nothing, and as he will leave every penny he can to Dieudonné, I daresay he feels there is a sort of rough justice in letting her marry Dick Hazelford. But all the same I should neither be surprised nor sorry if it never came off."

I was too much surprised myself to know what to say, and Lady Avondale proceeded, fanning herself with a fan of marabout feathers, and looking at me graciously—

"I have no influence with Donnie, but I think you have a good deal, and I believe you would be doing her a kindness if you used it against her marriage. She is a great deal too good for a man like that."

"But if you know all this, why don't you tell the Earl?" I exclaimed.

"I can't—I'm just the last person who ought to say a word. If Richard Hazelford doesn't marry, Avondale is the next heir, so you see our hands, or at least our tongues, are tied."

I felt that mine was tied also. Not without Miss Temple's permission could I betray her secrets, or hint to Lady Avondale that she might even now be freeing herself from the engagement there seemed more reason to deplore than I had hitherto guessed. And, indeed, for aught I knew, she might only have rivetted her fetters closer. There had been nothing in the troubled face to show me what decision she had come to since her conversation in the morning.

There was nothing to show me, when Lady Avon-

dale and I returned to the drawing-room. Miss Temple was there, but she did not even look up as we came in. She sat a little apart, bending over an embroidery frame, and looking very dignified and very silent. Lord Otterbourne had come downstairs again, and he and Colonel Hazelford were playing chess, but though they left their game when we appeared, and entered into conversation, I could deduce nothing from their looks or manner. Both were bland and imperturbable, and even my anxious gaze could detect no difference, unless it were that Lord Otterbourne was a little more gracious, and the Colonel a little more sarcastic than usual. It seemed to me as if his sarcasms were levelled at me, at my liking for a country life and my interest in country matters, but I saw that the colour deepened on Miss Temple's cheek, and her head bent lower over her work, as if the Colonel's shafts had found another home. She retired early, on the plea of a headache which her looks abundantly confirmed, and I went with her, eager to hear what had passed.

"Tell me!" I cried, as soon as we were in the dressing-room together, "have you seen him, and have you *done it*?"

I was too anxious for ceremony or coherence. Her white and agitated face seemed scarcely a harbinger of good news, and when she only turned away with a quivering lip, I knew that there was none for me to hear.

"No," she said, mastering herself after a minute, "I have not 'done it,' Esther; I doubt very much if I shall ever do it."

"But have you said nothing?" I said, incredulously. "Could you not make up your mind? I went away with Lady Avondale on purpose, and I hoped—oh I hoped so much—to hear that you were free."

"I tried," she faltered, "but you can't think how difficult it was."

"Difficult? Do you mean on account of Lord Otterbourne?"

"No—we never got as far as that."

"Then where was the difficulty? Did you find you liked Colonel Hazelford better than you thought?"

"Oh no—*no!*" she cried, vehemently. "I shall never like him again! It is wrong to hate any one, isn't it?—but when I think of the things he said, I believe I *hate* Richard Hazelford."

And as I looked at her flashing eyes, I believed so too.

"Did you tell him so?" I asked.

"I told him I did not love him."

"And what did he say?"

"He said—but oh! I can't repeat it," she exclaimed, with a blush that seemed to cover her like a scarlet cloud. "He seemed to think that if I did not love him, it must be that—that—"

"That you loved someone else, I suppose," I said, helping her embarrassment. "I daresay it was soothing to his self-esteem to take that view of the situation."

"He need not have insulted me," she said proudly. "You know me, Esther! Do I look like a girl—*am* I a girl who would love a man who could never marry

me, who does not *wish* to marry me, who—who is going to marry someone else? Could I let Dick suppose that his odious fancy was true? I would marry him ten times over rather than let him think that!"

She covered her face with her hands, but I saw the spreading colour far beyond the poor defence they made. Her breast heaved, and a few large tears trickled through her fingers. The passionate shame that possessed her seemed to weigh her to the ground.

I wondered what Colonel Hazelford could have said to move her like this? To whom could he have alluded? Not to *Basil*, surely, though "the man who could not marry her—who was going to marry someone else"—fitted him curiously well. It could not be Basil, I thought, for how could Colonel Hazelford have guessed a secret kept so well that even to me it had only been revealed in the unconscious self-betrayal of her dreams? And yet surely no random guess could have moved her like this. "What did he mean?" I asked her. "Did you know what—or whom—he meant?"

I had thought her blush before the deepest I had ever seen, but it deepened perceptibly now.

"Don't ask me," she said, in a strange, stifled whisper. "I cannot tell you, Esther! not you, dear, not *you*, of all the people in the world!" She slid down upon the ground, and buried her face in my dress, and I asked her no more. It seemed to me that there was nothing more to ask.

It took us a little by surprise to find at breakfast the next morning that Colonel Hazelford was going up to town that afternoon. I should have thought it

natural enough had he been actually dismissed, but I gathered from Miss Temple's incoherent confession that she had allowed things to remain as they were, rather than admit—or even countenance—Colonel Hazelford's surmise as to her reasons for wishing to break off her engagement. If it was not broken off, why should he be in such haste to depart? He said nothing as to his business in town, but a flash of intelligence that passed across Mirza Khan's face made me sure that the Indian servant was acquainted with the object of his master's journey. It was only to last a few days I found, and I could not help thinking that it had perhaps more to do with the conversation we had overheard the night before last than with anything that had passed between the Colonel and Miss Temple last night.

Whatever the cause, Miss Temple looked artlessly relieved, and I hoped that during his absence she would find courage to brave both the Earl's displeasure and Colonel Hazelford's insinuations. Writing is easier than speaking, especially to those who fear the probable retort, and I hoped she would send him such an unqualified dismissal as should make it impossible for him to return.

My time at the Castle had already expired, but the Earl himself asked me to remain another week, and Dieudonné pressed me so much that I could not refuse. Lady Otterbourne was ailing again, and Lady Avondale and her children had taken advantage of Colonel Hazelford's escort to return to town. I think both the Earl and his ward were a little afraid of being left together in their rather strained relations,

and certainly both made much of me when I consented to stay.

"But remember, Esther," said my mother, when I went over to tell her of the new arrangement, "it must only be for a week. Basil will be quite well by then, and I shall be glad to get back home."

"It shall only be for a week, I promise," I said, kissing her. "But, mother, if you knew how sweet and charming Miss Temple is, you would not wonder that I could not refuse her."

"I don't wonder, my dear. You don't think I can sit opposite to her every week in church and not see how sweet and lovable she is? Only last Sunday I could not help thinking that her smile was just like yours."

"Like mine?" I cried, laughing. "I have often heard of maternal vanity, but now I believe in it! Nothing else could make any one compare your little plain Esther to the beautiful Miss Temple."

"My dear," said my mother, earnestly. "You will never be plain to me—nor, I think, to some one else! Dr Cheriton——"

But if there was a subject I was determined not to talk about, it was Dr Cheriton. I jumped up, and assured my mother I should be late for the Castle luncheon unless I set off at once, and so got myself away, and found I had half an hour to wait—to say nothing of having missed seeing Basil.

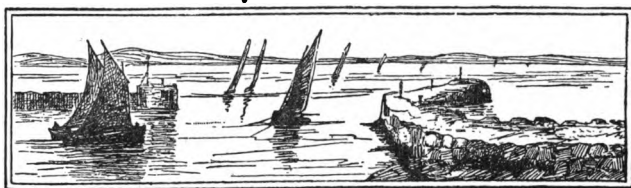
"It is very nice of Mrs Graham to spare you," said Dieudonné, when I told her the result of the interview; and I felt not less grateful myself. My mother would have been glad if I could have gone back at

once, I knew. She did not like the country, and Charlie, who had resumed his reading with Mr Fielding, found the walk into Hazelford and back rather irksome. They did not like leaving Basil while he was still on the sick list, but as soon as I returned, they would go home rejoicing ; and meanwhile Charlie grumbled at the vicar and the roads, at Basil and at me, and my mother pronounced the Home Farm insufferably dull, and sighed for the mild festivities of Dorcas-meetings and afternoon teas.

I heard all this from Dr Cheriton, who paid his daily visit to Miss Temple with an exasperating punctuality that was an additional reason for rigidly limiting my stay at Hazelford Castle. I would stay only a week, I determined, and I kept my determination.

It was a very quiet week, or so it seemed now that we were so small a party. But before it was over, I had come to think it the most eventful of my life.





## CHAPTER XXV.

### A CURIOUS INTRODUCTION.

“Be thy intents wicked or charitable,  
Thou com'st in such a questionable shape,  
That I will speak to thee.”—*Shakespeare.*

THE week that was destined to prove so eventful began, as I said, quietly enough. Lady Otterbourne kept her room; the Earl spent his mornings in the music-room, and his afternoons in riding, or in reading to his wife; and Miss Temple and I wandered at will in the beautiful rooms, or in the still more beautiful park. I think we both felt the absence of Colonel Hazelford, and even of Lady Avondale a relief; and I, at least, was very sorry when the time came for the Colonel's return. I had not been able to persuade Dieudonnée to write the letter of dismissal I so earnestly desired to be written, but I won a promise that she would see Colonel Hazelford on his return, and break off the engagement she admitted it could not be right to keep.

“I *could* not marry him, feeling as I do,” she said, with a shudder. “I will screw up my courage, and see him before the Earl. If Lord Otterbourne is there, he will not *dare* to say what he did before.”

Her cheeks flamed at the remembrance, and I could only hope that the Earl's presence would be as effectual a check as she believed. Proud and sensitive as she was, the possession of her secret—if, indeed, he possessed it—would be, I knew, a cruel weapon in hands as unscrupulous as I believed Colonel Hazelford's to be.

Mirza Khan had accompanied his master to town, and Siva rejoiced at his enemy's departure with an open triumph that was very amusing. The Hindu seemed quite a different person now Mirza Khan was gone. He appealed to every one for congratulations, invited sympathy with the artless confidence of a child, and even talked to me in an access of friendliness that seemed to include every member of the household. He spoke English wonderfully well, and I had no difficulty in understanding him, while no doubt I possessed in his eyes the merit of not having heard his stories before. He had been through the mutiny with Lord and Lady Otterbourne—who were only Captain and Mrs Hazelford when he entered their service, and one of his favourite stories was of the finding of their ward.

"It was in a temple, Miss Graham, and that was why they called her 'Temple,' you see. We had retaken Soolta-poor, and though there were no English left alive in it, I went looking and looking all about for my dear little murdered boy, and I heard a child crying in a temple by the river, and I went in to see what it was. And there, on the ground, was an Indian woman with an English child in her arms. The ayah was dead, and the child was almost

famished—they must have been there two days, you see, if they had crawled in there after the massacre, as we thought they must. The ayah was covered with wounds, but the child was scarcely hurt, and it was beautiful to see how my lord looked at it, and how he seemed to think it had been sent for his consolation. My lady was too ill to know anything about it. She lost her reason for many months, but it came back by degrees, and then my lord told her the little girl had been left to him to bring up. We never told her where we found it. No one has ever dared to say Sooltapoor before her yet."

Siva stopped, with tears in his eyes. Tears were in mine also, as I listened to him. Though my little dead sister was only a memory and a name, I could not forget that it was at Sooltapoor that she perished—that Sooltapoor was a name of woe to my mother no less than to the Countess of Otterbourne. Only my mother was not a Countess, and could not indulge her grief. But perhaps the pressure of daily duties had been grief's best cure, as the taking of Basil to her stricken heart had been its own exceeding great reward.

"There were no other children saved, I suppose?" I said, wistfully, and the old man shook his head with emphasis.

"None, none!" he said mournfully. "You may be sure we made only too sure of that. The ayah must have hidden the little one we found in the folds of her dress, and taken the blows that were meant for it. She did well, and, no doubt she has her reward—but she died. Only that one little child escaped alive."

I knew at least better than this. One other had been brought alive out of that city of doom, one other, who was my brother Basil! How strange it was that he and the Earl's ward should have met as they had. It did not seem so strange that, having met, they should have loved each other; it seemed rather the most natural thing in the world that a subtle and mysterious sympathy should have drawn their souls together.

I should like to have asked Siva some more questions as to the child whose fate had so nearly been the same as little Nelly's, but Lord Otterbourne came into the hall, and I could not. I stood a good deal in awe of the Earl, kind as he was, and I did not wish him to think me prying or curious. After all, it was no concern of mine, or even of my mother's. The dark, beautiful girl who was Lord Otterbourne's ward could not be our golden-haired Nelly, and that was all my mother would care to know. I would not even tell her what I had heard, lest the fatal name of Sooltapoor should re-open that long-closed wound.

She was happy now, I knew, and I would say nothing to break her hard-won peace.

Very happy and peaceful she looked, I thought, as I came up the garden walk a few days later, and saw her sitting at the window. Colonel Hazelford was expected at the Castle, and I had gone over to the farm to ask after Basil, and found only my mother at home. She had left off widow's caps, and her still dark hair was only covered with a little square of delicate lace. The fine dark eyes beamed a welcome

to me, the mouth was curved in sympathetic smiles. My mother was a handsome woman still, and in her youth she must have been much handsomer than any of her children. Even Charlie, who was so much better looking than myself, had not my mother's well-cut features or brilliant eyes.

"Have you seen Basil?" she asked, as she came to meet me; and something in her tone made me wish that I had done so. I felt that there was something to hear about him, and I preferred to hear news of Basil from himself.

"No," I said. "He has not gone to the Castle, has he?"

He had not been there all the week—not once, indeed, since his accident with Deva. He made his accident the excuse, though Dr Cheriton said he was getting well as fast as possible, and what business had to be transacted with the Earl, Uncle Chayter transacted. I felt that it was best, that Basil's absence was wise and right in every way, but I missed him sorely—and I did not think I was the only one who did.

He had not gone to the Castle now, my mother said, but back to Hazelford with May Fielding, who had been spending the day in her future home.

"And, my dear," said my mother, with the smile with which every one tells such news, "I am glad to say the day is fixed at last. I heard Basil drive back again just now, so I thought you might have seen him and heard all about it."

"I have not seen him," I said, with a sudden choking in my throat, that was as illogical as it was absurd. "Tell me, mother! when is it to be?"

"My dear Esther, what is there to be so excited about? On the 10th—that will be a month next Thursday. Basil says the hay will all be in then, and his arm will be quite well, so there could not be a better time."

I said nothing. I could not force myself to utter congratulations, and nothing else would have been appropriate.

"I am glad in every way," my mother went on. "It has been a long, dull waiting for Basil, and May has been behaving rather foolishly with Mr Potts. I suppose such a pretty girl can hardly help flirting, and I daresay she found Hazelford dull when Basil came here——"

"Don't make excuses for her," I said, sharply. "I have no patience with her."

"My dear, you never had," said my mother, gently, and it was so true that, contradictory as I felt, I could not say a word.

"Does Basil know?" I asked, drearily.

"About her silly flirtations? He must know something, I should think, but you know what Basil is. He is so incapable of anything of the sort himself, that he would never believe it of May. And, indeed, there has been nothing but vanity and foolishness, I quite believe."

I believed it too, but I do not know that I found the belief as consolatory as my mother seemed to do. Vanity and foolishness were not the qualities I desired in my brother's wife, or that promised happiness in their wedded life.

However, it was too late to think of that now.

I choked back the useless scorn and indignation I felt in my heart, and went out to find Basil, and make such poor pretence of congratulation as I might. One of the men told me he had gone down the lane to a field at a little distance, and I walked on to meet him. The evening was dull and overcast, and the arching trees made the lane seem almost dark; but the grey, dusky light suited my sombre mood. I walked on sadly enough, thinking of my brother, and what I should find to say to him, and presently I saw him coming towards me. He was walking slowly, as men walk when they are full of thought; but when he saw me he quickened his pace, and soon came up to me. He was looking better than I had ventured to hope, for it was the first time I had seen him since his encounter with the bull. One arm was still in a sling, but except for that he seemed quite well, and only laughed at my anxious inquiries.

"I am all right again, I assure you. I thought Cheriton had told you that. He says I shall be as sound as ever in another fortnight, and he ought to know," said Basil, as we turned back together. "Never mind about me now, Esther. There is something I want to tell you."

"I know—I have heard it," I interrupted. "I have seen my mother, and she told me."

"And you are not glad?"

There was reproach in his tone, but I could not pretend a gladness I could not and did not feel. Grave and careworn and sad—was this how a man should look when his wedding-day was fixed? The

sight of my brother's face moved me to futile and passionate revolt, and undid all my efforts at self-control.

"How can I be glad?" I cried, dashing away the tears that were so useless and so bitter. "How can I be glad, Basil. If I thought you would be happy, I should be glad indeed! If I thought there was any faintest hope of happiness for you, I would try not to mind; but as it is, how can I?"

"Be glad," he said, earnestly, "even as it is. It is best in every way, as the right thing always is. I am weaker than I thought I was—but when I am married, it will be easier for me. What is only folly now would be sin then—and surely I may trust to be kept from that!"

My dear Basil! I felt, with a throb of unspeakable pride, with a strange sharp pleasure snatched from the very jaws of pain, that to no one else would he have spoken just like this. Only to me, his sister and his friend—to me, who had divined his unhappy love, and whose sympathy he had once called his greatest consolation. Yet how false his reasoning seemed to me, how mistaken and how full of peril the course he had chosen! Would he have persisted in it if he had known as much as I did—if I could honourably have told him all I knew? Ought I not to tell him? Might it not save him, even now, at this eleventh hour?

But what right had I? He would have demanded proof, I knew, and what proof had I? It was all inference and induction. I had nothing to go upon but a girl's ready blushes, and the whisperings of a disordered dream.

"I can't think you are right," was all I found courage to say. "You admit that what you call folly now would be something else then. Isn't it rather like what the old Puritans called 'tempting Providence' to marry, feeling so? And," I added faintly, —for preaching never came easy to me—"there is the prayer, 'Lead us not into temptation.'"

"Yes," said Basil, with the simple directness that characterised him, "I have thought of that. But when one's duty is as plain as mine, one can only do it with such strength as may be given."

I made a desperate effort.

"Would your duty be as plain, Basil, if you had *not* only yourself and May to think of?"

"Not only ourselves? What do you mean?" he said, with an utter want of comprehension that made it still more difficult to answer. "Who else is there whom I ought to consider? It seems to me entirely a question for May and me."

If I had only been a little more sure, I could not but have told him. The treason of revealing Miss Temple's secret would have been as nothing to the treason of keeping silence in Basil's strait. But I was not sure enough to speak, or perhaps in my heart I was not sure that her love was strong enough to brave the Earl's displeasure, and the loss of position and of wealth, for the sake of my brother Basil. I stood silent and perplexed, but he understood me better than I thought.

"I see what is in your mind, and it is like you to think it," he said, putting his arm round my shoulders as we went along the quiet lane. "But even if—if it

were so—my course would be clear. Not for any happiness of mine could I hold myself free to wreck May's."

"And to ensure May's, you would sacrifice not your own only, but *hers*?"

"Hers is not in question," he said, gravely. "I was only thinking of what might perhaps have been not quite impossible in the future, had we both been free. As it is, there is no need for me to perplex myself with imagining contingencies that can never arise."

I could say no more. I honoured him with all my heart, but not the less did I feel that he was sadly, and perhaps even fatally, mistaken. We walked along in a silence I had neither spirits nor courage to break, and when we came to the gate that led into the park, I wished him good-night.

"You are sure you don't mind going back alone?" he said. "It is getting rather dark—"

"I don't mind at all. It will be light as soon as I get from under the trees."

He stooped and kissed me, and I stood looking after him till he turned into the Home Farm, when a sudden voice behind me made me turn in swift alarm. A man had risen from the long grass in the ditch, and was leaning against the little wooden gate through which I had to pass. He was a dirty, rough-looking man about sixty years of age, with unkempt, grizzled hair, and a decidedly repulsive appearance. An evil face it was, I thought, with long, thin lips, a coarse, wide mouth, and a leering, familiar expression, and I wished I had not let Basil leave me.

"Be yon Ford's Farm?" he asked, pointing at the

sweet, peaceful homestead, with its close vicinage of long, red-tiled barns, and rounded stacks.

"Yes," I said, briefly. The man was evidently not quite sober, and I was not anxious to enter into conversation with him. Most likely, I thought, he was a haymaker looking out for a job ; but as Basil would never engage any but sober men, I thought his chance of employment at "Ford's Farm" was very small indeed. However, as he stood staring at the house, and showing no disposition to move on, I said to him, "Do you want to see Mr Ford? You will find him in the farmyard now."

"'Twasn't him 'as come by with you just now, surely!" he said, in tones of great astonishment. "Is Mr Bashil Ford a howling swell like that?"

"That was Mr Ford," I said impatiently. "Will you kindly let me pass? I am in a hurry, and I want to go into the park."

He lurched a little aside, and I slipped through the gate, but I had hardly gone half a dozen steps before I heard the coarse, sottish tones calling after me—

"Hi! I say, Miss—what sort of a chap is he?"

I walked on without answering, but as I heard the gate open and swing to again, I faced round. The man was coming after me, rolling rather unsteadily, but with a sort of military swagger in his gait that suggested an old soldier's walk rather than a labourer's slouch.

"Can't you answer a civil question?" he asked. "I want to know what sort of a chap Mr Ford is, and I've good reason for wanting. Ye couldn't guess what I want to see him for, I'll lay a pound!"

"No," I said, shortly. "I suppose you want work."

"Work!" he cried, with a drunken chuckle that made me wish I had not answered him. "Work, is it! No, bedad! I'll niver do another sthroke of that, annyway! I'm a jintleman, I am, *now*. I want to see Mr Bashil Ford to interjuice meself, that's what I want *him* for! He'll be very glad to see me, my dear, don't you be afraid. You and him seemed oncommon thick as you come up the lane together, but him and me'll be thicker than that."

I looked at him with a strange sinking at my heart. My legs trembled under me; I felt dizzy and cold. Who and what could this wretched being be, who spoke thus of my brother Basil?

"Who are you?" I cried, telling myself stoutly that I had no faintest idea what the answer would be. Yet when I heard it, I knew it was only a reflection of my own horrified surmise.

"Who am I, my dear?" he said with a horrible leer. "There's a good many people would like to know that—and won't! But I'll tell *you*, along of your being so thick with Mr Bashil Ford. I'll interjuice myself to you, same as I'm going to interjuice myself to him. My name's Trumpeter Ford!"



## CHAPTER XXVI.

### TRUMPETER FORD.

“Thy fame, thy worth, thy filial love, at last,  
Shall soothe this aching heart for all the past.”

—*Campbell.*

**S**O this was Trumpeter Ford—this was Basil’s *father!* The horror of the thought struck me absolutely dumb. This drunken outcast, this wreck of humanity, this poverty-stricken, disreputable old man, was the man to whom Basil owed a son’s duty! Oh, my brother, my brother, of whose possible parentage I had indulged such high, such wild and foolish thoughts, how would he bear it?—how should I bear it for him?

The man who had called himself Trumpeter Ford had turned back now, and was stalking over the grass with that miserable remnant of a military walk that seemed to show his pretensions were no empty boast. He was making for the gate, and as I realised that he was probably going to Basil—to his *son*—new strength seemed to come into my limbs. At least Basil should not meet him unwarned and unprepared. If I could do nothing else, I could save him from this.

I flew, rather than ran, to the gate, and out into

the lane beyond. I was young and sure of foot, and if the drunken old man had any thought of intercepting me—and to do him justice I do not think he had—I was too quick for him. Before he could even reach the gate, I was half-way down the lane, running as if I had been pursued by the Furies.

Luckily, Basil had not gone in. I saw him in the farm-yard, giving some parting directions to one of the men, and waited for him at the great white gate. As I stood there, panting and palpitating with agitation and haste, I found myself idiotically counting the bars, noticing the clinging straws, the heads of trefoil or clover that told of the passage of laden wains, and listening to the coarse voice of the carter, and to the clear, refined tones that mingled with it. When Basil came across the yard, I looked at him with a sort of stupid wonder. This could not be Trumpeter Ford's son, I thought—this, that was my brother Basil!

He saw me, and came to me, looking utterly surprised.

"You here, Esther? you! There is nothing the matter, is there? Miss Temple——?"

I laughed outright. What was Miss Temple to Trumpeter Ford's son? What could she ever be, that she should be first in his thoughts like this?

Somehow the sound of my own laugh frightened me, and brought me to myself. I must have been a little beside myself, or I could not have laughed like that; I, whose thoughts were so far from merriment or laughter.

"Nothing is the matter with Miss Temple," I said

impatiently. "What is she to you, or you to her? Forget her, Basil—forget that you ever knew her, if you can! It is not Miss Temple—it is not even May; oh, Basil, Basil! it is yourself—yourself—yourself!"

He looked at me as if he thought I had taken leave of my senses, as perhaps I had. The hurry and the horror of it, the thought of the warning I must give, and the fear of not giving it in time, all combined to render me distracted. But perhaps my frantic looks were in some sense a preparation. He looked as startled and concerned as I could possibly have desired.

"It is something very grave you have to tell me," he said, taking my hands in his across the gate. "My poor Esther, do not tremble so! Whatever it is, I am not afraid."

How brave and strong he looked, how good and noble he was, this brother of my heart! Only to look at him, and to hold his hand like this, was strength and comfort and encouragement such as nothing else could have given.

"Some one is coming to see you—coming here, now—at once," I managed to say at last. "Some one we have often talked of, Basil—some one we once thought we might even be glad to see."

He looked at me attentively.

"Have you seen this—some one?"

I bent my head, for words would not come. Out in the lane I could hear a foolish whistle, and the tramp of unsteady feet.

"Tell me who it is," said Basil, gravely, but the sounds in the lane had left me no self-control.

"We thought he was dead," I cried, wildly, "And oh! I wish, I wish he was!"

"Hush!" said Basil, sternly. "My dear, whoever it is, we will not talk—we will not think—like that. Tell me—for I cannot even guess."

"You have no idea?"

"None."

And I had to tell him—I, who loved him so well. I got the words out somehow.

"It is your father—it is Trumpeter Ford," I said; and though my voice sounded to me faint and far away, I knew by the change in his face that he had heard.

Some one was coming in sight now, rolling from side to side, and making so evidently for us, that Basil—my poor ignorant Basil—called out to him, lest I should be frightened, "Be off, my man! We don't want your sort here!"

And then my hand was on his mouth, and I had fallen sobbing on the gate, and I think my brother understood. He bent his head to mine and whispered rapidly, "Go in, and wait for me—but say nothing to the mother."

I obeyed him to the letter, only stopping as I went into the house to send off a boy with a message to the Castle to say that I was unexpectedly detained.

And then I waited and waited, while the dusk fell and the faint summer stars came out, and tried—vainly enough, I dare say—not to show how disturbed and anxious I was.

"Esther has seen the ghost again, I should think," said Charlie, who was much amused at my abstracted

and incoherent replies; and my mother looked at me with a rallying smile, and said something about Dr Cheriton that seemed to me the grimmest and ghastliest of jokes. If they could have known how far my thoughts were from marrying or giving in marriage! At last a summons came.

"Miss Esther, Master Basil wants you," said Mrs Munns at the door, and I went out to him without a word. He was waiting for me in the hall, and I saw that his face was pale as death.

"I will walk back with you," he said briefly. "We cannot talk here."

I got my hat, and went with him, wondering much what I should have to hear. I ought not to have wondered, I felt afterwards. Any one who had known my brother Basil as long as I ought to have *known*.

"It was as you thought, Esther," he said, as we went along. "The man you saw was—my father! I thank you for trying to break it to me, to prepare me for it. Nothing could have quite prepared me, I believe; but I know you did your best."

"Indeed, *indeed*, I did! But, oh, Basil! how you must have suffered. How I wish I could have helped you, or have borne it for you."

"It was only just at first," said Basil simply. "Afterwards, thank God! better thoughts came. I ought to be glad—I *am* glad—that he found his way to me. I have not brought him into the house, Esther. He is not fit, as he is now, to be under the same roof with your sweet mother, but I have done what I could."

"I am sure you have," I said, as he paused. And then I asked, "Where is he now?"

"He is with Burdon, the carter, you know. He is a trustworthy man, and he has a decent cottage——"

"And a wife with a tongue a mile long!" I interrupted. "It will be all over Coombe, and Hazelford too, to-morrow. Oh Basil! I wish you had not sent him there."

"What does it matter?" said Basil, gently. "Every one will know, sooner or later, of course. They *must*. Do you think I am going to desert him, or be ashamed of him? Whatever he is, he is my father, and I shall stand by him."

He spoke firmly and bravely enough, but the pain in his voice smote to my heart.

"You will do what is right, I know, Basil. But have you thought how hard it will be?"

"Yes," he said gravely, "but *you* will help me, I know. He shall not come near any of you—at least until he has learnt better ways—but when the mother has gone, his son's house must be his home."

I listened in stupefied surprise. Even I had not anticipated this.

"What will May say?" I ejaculated at last.

Basil started and stopped short. Then he said in a voice of great perplexity—

"It was very stupid of me, but I never thought of May."

"You will have to think of her."

"Certainly! Well—she must hear, and decide. I cannot judge for her. She is not yet my wife,

and I think my first duty must be to that poor old man."

He walked along, pondering; and then he said—

"I would not insist on his living with us—I would not even wish it, unless May could feel with me that it is a work sent to us, to make him other than he is—but I must own him before all the world, accept him loyally, and do my duty to him, as far as in me lies. It may be that all that has happened to me was just a preparation for it. If I had not been lost to him, I might have been as he is, and how could I have helped him then?"

How, indeed? But who but Basil would have looked at it like this?

"Did you hear how he found you out?" I asked by-and-by.

"Was he fit to give an intelligible account?" said Basil, sadly. "He gave me a long rambling statement, but these are the main facts I made out from it. He was trumpeter in the —th Foot, as we always supposed, but he never went to Sooltapoor. He fell out of the ranks, dying of dysentery, as they thought, just outside the city, and his wife and children had to go on without him. He didn't die, as you see, but lay hiding in the neighbourhood till after the massacre, and then he thought it useless to make inquiries. So he heard nothing of me, till, after all these years, he met some one who knew about me."

"But who could it have been?"

"I could not make out. Some one, he said, who had been struck by my name, and by my having been rescued from Sooltapoor. He made a little mystery

about it, and I did not press it. That was not the real point, after all."

This seemed to be all that Basil could tell me, and though I felt that it was rather vague, I could not but admit it was sufficient. There was enough to establish identity, and that was all that mattered. Details no doubt would come—when his father should be fit to give them. I thought in my heart how much better it would have been if Trumpeter Ford had been lying in the ditch at Sooltapoor, but I did not dare to say so. And, indeed, as I looked at my brother's noble face, the unworthy thought died. He was glad, I knew, even as he said. The gift of a father, even such as this, he would take with grateful and reverent hands—and who was I to say that he might not find a blessing in it?





## CHAPTER XXVII.

### NOT ALL A DREAM.

“I had a dream which was not all a dream.”—*Byron.*

**D**INNER was over when I reached the Castle, as the servant who let me in informed me with unnecessary concern. A substantial tea had made me independent of it, and besides this, I was far too excited to eat.

The drawing-room door was open, and through it I could see Miss Temple, looking more beautiful, I thought, than I had ever seen her before. She was dressed in a pale yellow silk that set off her dusky tresses and dark, lustrous eyes, and round her throat was a necklace of black pearls. Her hands and arms were covered by long black gloves, and from her side hung a fan of black feathers. She saw me, and came out to me with a smile.

“Esther!—at last! I began to think you never were coming!”

“I was detained. I will tell you about it presently, but not now—not here.”

For Colonel Hazelford had come into the hall, and was listening with an interest I could well have dis-

pensed with. He came forward and shook hands with me, but I felt that his eyes were reading my face with intent and embarrassing inquiry.

"Detained?" he said, in a tone of concern I felt to be quite unnecessary, "I hope it was nothing *unpleasant* that kept you?"

I did not know how to answer. I shrank from the Colonel's mocking glance with a sort of shuddering repulsion. Almost I could have fancied that he knew or guessed what had kept me, absurd as I knew the fancy must be.

"Miss Graham is tired—we must not keep her standing here," said Dieudonné, kindly, and I went up-stairs, feeling indeed utterly worn out.

It was not long before Miss Temple joined me. Nothing could be said while her maid was in the room, but she dismissed Fifine unusually soon, and then she came and sat down beside me.

"You have something to tell me," she said, laying her hand on mine. "I should like to hear it, Esther—not from curiosity, you know."

"No, I am sure of that! But indeed it would not matter if it were. Every one will know it only too soon," I said, bitterly.

"Don't tell me unless you like," she said, looking a little hurt.

"I do like. I wish to tell you, if only to save Basil the telling."

"It is a trouble, then?" she said, wistfully.

"It is what most men would think a great trouble, a great calamity. But Basil does not. He is not like other men, as you told me once."

"Did I?" she said, looking carefully away. "If it struck one who knows so little of him, I daresay it was true."

"It *was* true," I said, quietly. At any other time I should have smiled at the poor pretence of indifference in her tone, but now I was only anxious to get my story told. "It was true, whether you knew him well or not," I repeated. "He has been sorely tried to-night, and he has borne the trial nobly—borne it as I think few other men would have done."

She raised her head with the regal gesture that became her so well. Her face was still turned from me, but I caught its reflection in the glass, and I knew that it wore a smile that was proud and sweet and glad.

"Tell me," she said, gently, but her fingers closed on mine with an unconscious pressure that betrayed more interest than she chose to show.

"You know that Basil was adopted by my father, and that we never knew who his own father was. We thought he was probably a trumpeter who was supposed to have been killed at Sooltapoor. He was not killed, it seems. Trumpeter Ford is alive, and to-night he has been at the Home Farm—to-night Basil has seen his father."

"His father! Trumpeter Ford!" She stood up, eager, excited, past concealment, curiously moved. "Trumpeter Ford? Was that the name?" she muttered, "Trumpeter Ford?"

She seemed to have forgotten my presence, to be listening intently, or striving to recall some half-forgotten memory. The look of strained attention

suggested either effort. I did not speak. I was too much astonished to proceed with my narrative.

"Go on," she said impatiently. "You have seen him? Tell me what he is like."

"Like?" I repeated, blankly. How could I tell her the bitter truth? Was there any need to shame Basil before the time? Perhaps she might never see Trumpeter Ford, might never know what Basil's father was!

So I reasoned; but the intentness of her gaze seemed to drag words from me almost against my will.

"He was old," I said, slowly, "old—and poor—and—not a gentleman, of course——"

I stopped, but she hardly seemed to know it. She was staring straight before her with wide abstracted gaze.

"Not a gentleman, of course," she repeated, with emphasis. "Not a gentleman—and old, and poor?—A soldier, wasn't he—grey, and shabby, and disreputable? Not sober, even—oh! how could they do it?"

She was not speaking to me, I think. She was not thinking of me, or looking at me, but at something or some one far away; or at least, so it seemed. I caught her hands in mine, and made her look at me.

"What do you mean?" I cried. "How did you know? When did you see him, that you can describe him like that?"

She looked at me in a bewildered manner. "Was it so, really?" she asked. "Was he *really* like that?"

‘Yes—yes! But how did you know?’

“I am not sure. I think, I believe, I must have dreamt it.”

“Dreamt it? But when? Was that the dream you tried to tell me—the dream you could not remember?”

She put her hands before her eyes, frowning with the effort at remembrance, but in vain.

“I can’t tell! I remember nothing clearly. Only when you said he was old, and poor, and not a gentleman, I seemed to know the rest. And you say it is true? I am sorry indeed if it is. What will your brother do?”

“What do *you* think he will do?” I asked her.

She paused, considering, with her head bent on her hand, and when she looked up again her eyes were bright with unshed tears.

“I think that he will try to save him,” she said, softly, “that he will not mind his being old, or poor—or—bad. I do not *know*, of course, knowing him so little—but I *think* that is what Mr Ford will do.”

Well, she knew him better than I did, I acknowledged with a foolish pang. But before I could speak, she went on quickly—

“That is what he would do *if* it were his father, I believe—but is it, do you think? Could Mr Ford’s father be like that? When I dreamt of that old man, Esther—and I *did* dream of him!—he was not his father really, I am sure.”

“What have dreams to do with it?” I said, sadly.  
“I am afraid there is no doubt about the fact. Basil

was satisfied with the proofs he gave, and Basil is not a man to be easily taken in."

"No," she agreed briefly. But though she said no more, she looked disturbed and perplexed. A little while she walked about the room, with troubled eyes that seemed vainly peering into space ; and then she kissed me and wished me an abrupt good-night.

I did not follow her. I thought she wished to be alone, and I did not think that I could not sleep. I was too tired and too excited for that.

How long I sat thinking I do not know, but I must have dozed off in my chair, for I woke at last with a start, wondering where I was, and what had waked me. Then I saw that Miss Temple had come back into the dressing-room, and was standing by the door. She was passing her fingers over the wall, feeling, apparently, for the key that had used to hang there, and though her eyes were open, I knew that she was asleep.

I sprang up, broad awake enough myself at the sight. Once more she gave up her unavailing search, and opening the door, went out on to the landing. Once more I followed her along the corridor and down into the hall.

It was quite empty now. The grey skies held no moon, and except that a June night is never quite dark, we should have been in darkness. Miss Temple walked on as easily and securely as if it were broad daylight, and I groped doubtfully after her. In the middle of the hall she stopped and began talking to herself in low, rapid tones.

I could not at first catch the words. When I

could, I was only the more astonished. I could not understand what she said, but I knew enough to know that she was speaking in Hindustani—the language of which she had declared that she did not remember a single word! In my surprise, I made a sudden movement, stumbled against one of the many tables, and overturned a brass waiter upon it that fell with clatter and clangour to the ground.

Miss Temple stopped abruptly, gave a little cry, and evidently awoke. She was trembling and cold, but she spoke in her natural voice.

“What is it, Esther? Where am I?” She stared round in her surprise. “What are you doing here?” she exclaimed. “And where are Dick and Mirza Khan?”

“Come upstairs, and I will tell you all about it,” I said, soothingly, and though she seemed half reluctant to leave the hall, she let me take her upstairs and lead her back to bed, but she would not lie down.

“I can’t—I should go mad!” she protested. “Esther, I have had that dream again.”

Was she waking or dreaming now, I wondered. But her eyes met mine intent and clear.

“I have had that dream again, and—” catching her breath with excitement—“*I remember it now!*”

I was scarcely less excited than she was. There was nothing I desired more than that she should be able to recall the dream that was so much more than a dream, the dream in which Colonel Hazelford and Mirza Khan had played a part in the flesh, the dream she had wished that the Earl could have known, and—Basil!

T

"Have I been sleep-walking?" she asked. "Did I go down into the hall, and did you follow me?"

"Yes," I said, briefly. I could only tell her the truth, whatever Dr Cheriton might say.

"I thought *that* at least was too vivid not to be real! We were in the hall, weren't we, when I woke?"

"Yes," I said again.

"Was any one else there?"

"No one—so far as I know."

"And you were with me all the time?"

"All the time, dear! I came down with you and never let you out of my sight."

"It is strange," she murmured. "I thought I saw Dick and Mirza Khan."

I waited, breathless but silent. Not by a word would I disturb the current of her thoughts, or interfere with the memories that seemed to be waking in her startled eyes.

"*Now* I know where I heard about that old man!" she exclaimed. "It was Mirza Khan who spoke about him—Mirza Khan and Dick."

"What did they say?"

"They said—but oh! Esther, what could have put such thoughts into my head? It seems wrong to impute such wickedness even in one's dreams. But you must remember it *was* only a dream."

"Well?" I said, breathlessly. I was by no means so sure as she was that it was only or entirely a dream. "What did they say—Colonel Hazelford and Mirza Khan?"

"They said it would be quite easy to find a man like that, who would call himself Trumpeter Ford."

"Call himself!"

"That was what they said. I could not understand it quite, but they said the Earl need never know—nor Mr Ford. There was something, too, about the poor little boy who died—the little Viscount, you know; they talked as if he were alive, Esther—as if they knew it and the Earl did not."

Such a flood of light burst upon me as fairly blinded me. I felt stunned.

"It is Basil—it is Basil!" I gasped at length. "Oh, Dieudonné, don't you see it? The little Viscount did not die—he was carried safe out of Sooltapoor in my mother's arms! He is my brother Basil!"

I remember saying this; I remember it quite distinctly; but I remember nothing more. I suppose I must have fainted, for the next thing I can recall is lying on the floor in quite a pool of water, and seeing Miss Temple standing over me with an up-lifted pitcher, like the figure of a Greek maiden on a Wedgewood vase.





## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### FATHER AND SON.

"I feel the link of Nature draw me."

"**E**STHER," said Miss Temple, the next morning, "do you know, I think you were a little *delirious* last night?"

We were in the dressing-room together, drinking our morning cup of tea, but this was almost the first word we had spoken to each other since her rather heroic treatment had revived me from my swoon. I had been too faint and bewildered for further conversation, and I found now that she had been too frightened at what she thought my incoherent words.

"I was not delirious," I said. "I was quite sane, I assure you."

"Do you know what you said?"

"Yes," I said, deliberately. "I said that I believed my brother Basil to be Lord Otterbourne's son. And I *do* believe it. If you will listen to me, I will tell you why."

Then I expounded to her the thoughts that had flashed into my mind when she told me of her dream, thoughts that calm reflection had only seemed to establish and confirm.

"For it was *not* all a dream," I argued, "and how can we tell how much of it may not have been true? It was not a dream that Colonel Hazelford and Mirza Khan were in the hall together, talking in Hindustani, and that you seemed to understand them. It is not a dream that a man, such as you dreamt they spoke of, a drunken disreputable old man, calling himself Trumpeter Ford, is claiming Basil for his son. That is not a dream, Dieudonné, but do we either of us believe it? Do we think that *he* is Basil's father? And if not, why should he pretend to be? A man like that could never think of such a thing himself, or know enough to make it possible. It is not his doing, I am very sure—it is someone who is anxious to put people off the scent."

"You mean Colonel Hazelford? But Esther. I do not think that, with all his faults, he would be so base as that."

"Do you not? What will you say when I tell you that he saw Basil in India, and that Basil knew him and called him 'Uncle Dick'? He disowned him—he has denied to me that he knew him—but I do not believe it. It all fits in too well with what we know now. He *did* know him, but he disowned him. He took no pains to discover how he had escaped from Sooltapoor, to find in whose charge he was. He did not *wish* to know. He wished to lose sight of him, as he did. And now, now that he has crossed his path again, he sends this wretched old man to call him his son, and throw us all off the scent for ever."

I was almost inarticulate with excitement, and Miss Temple seemed scarcely less agitated.

"What can we do?" she exclaimed, clasping her hands. "We *cannot* stand by and let such wickedness succeed! Oh, Esther, we *must* save him—we must tell the Earl!"

"Yes," I assented, "we must tell the Earl. It is the only thing to do."

We agreed that she should be the one to tell the story, her more intimate acquaintance with Lord Otterbourne making the task so much easier for her than for me. I was to be sent for to confirm or corroborate whatever seemed to need confirmation, and it was not long before my summons came.

"My lord would speak with the mem Sahib," said Siva, gliding into the room with his peculiarly noiseless step, and I went at once to the Earl's room, where he and Miss Temple were closeted together.

Lord Otterbourne sat at his writing-table, looking pale and agitated. He sat with his hand shading his face, as if to conceal the emotion he could not control, but his voice betrayed how powerfully he was affected by the story his ward had laid before him. He rose to meet me, holding out his hand, and looking into my face with quite pathetic earnestness.

"Will you tell me the circumstances of the child's—of Mr Ford's—rescue and adoption by your father?" the Earl asked. I complied as well as I was able, and he heard me with an absorbing interest and attention I felt to be encouraging.

"Except that I am naturally unwilling to think so ill of a kinsman, there is nothing in the story you

have told me incompatible with facts. My little son was about to proceed to Europe with his mother. We had just received the news of my accession to the title, and but that no soldier could then desert his post, I should have gone with them. Lady Otterbourne and the child were to travel with her sister, Mrs Colquhoun, whose husband had been invalided home, but Lady Otterbourne was taken so seriously ill on the way to Sooltapoor that she could not proceed. She stayed at Azuffghur with her maid and Siva, and the boy went on with the Colquhouns. The rest you know—I hope—better than I.” He stopped, greatly moved, and then he said—

“Was there nothing about the child that would serve to identify him—no name on his clothes, or even an initial?”

“Nothing,” I said, sadly. “The night-dress he had on was clean, but it was coarse, and bore no mark. Very likely it was not his own—it was all such terrible confusion. The only thing about him beside that was a sort of silver box or locket on his arm. There was nothing in it but some Hindu words, which my father said were a sort of charm, and far too common to give any clue.”

“A *Tāwīz* with a *muntar* in it, no doubt,” said the Earl. “Yes, they are common enough, and any ayah or bearer might have put it on. But I should like to see this one, if Mr Ford has it still.”

“My mother has kept it, I know, and I am sure she will let you see it.”

“I should like to do so,” he said, and then he relapsed into silence. He seemed, indeed, buried in

thought, and neither of us ventured to interrupt him.

"If I could only think it!" he said at last, "if I could dare to hope! I must see Mirza Khan! If the facts are as you suppose, it is useless to see Richard. A man who would do as he must have done would stoop to any lie; but the servant may be open to persuasion, or to fear."

He rang the bell, and a few moments later Mirza Khan stood within the door making his usual salaam, but looking at us with scarcely concealed surprise.

The examination, if so it might be called, did not last long. Mirza Khan was swift to perceive that it was his interest to speak the truth. He was even abjectly willing to tell all he knew, and the Earl was soon in possession of the facts of the case. They were almost exactly as we had suspected. Colonel Hazelford, then a young captain on the Staff, had seen and recognised the little Viscount on the steps of Government House, and had disowned him. Afterwards, finding that Mirza Khan had seen him also, he had bribed the man to keep his secret. A small bribe had sufficed until Mirza Khan, overhearing our conversation in the conservatory, became convinced that the child still lived, and was to be found close at hand. Then he demanded a heavier fee, under threats of revealing all he knew to the Earl, and Hazelford had only pacified him by acceding to his terms, and reminding him that he had no proof to offer of Basil Ford's identity.

Finally, they came to terms, and the disgraceful compact was made. Colonel Hazelford had gone up



“MIRZA KHAN WAS SWIFT TO PERCEIVE THAT IT WAS HIS INTEREST TO  
SPEAK THE TRUTH.”—Page 296.



to town, and finding an old soldier who had been formerly stationed at Sooltapoor, had bribed him to personate Trumpeter Ford, and sent him to the Home Farm furnished with sufficient information to give credibility to his story. They had thought, added Mirza Khan, that Mr Ford would be too anxious to conceal his connection with such a man to make very stringent inquiries; while the discovery of this supposititious father would certainly prevent any attempts on my part to follow up the clue that might have led to his real one.

"And now that the lord sahib knows all, he—he will forgive?" said the Indian, with a lower prostration than ever. But Lord Otterbourne waved him impatiently aside. "That is a matter that can wait," he said, sternly. "*First*, I must see my son!"

Mirza Khan disappeared, glad, I think, to make his escape so easily, and Lord Otterbourne turned to me.

"Miss Graham, will you go with me? Will you break it to my boy? I must see him, I must satisfy myself that there is no possible mistake, before his mother knows. I can scarcely doubt—after hearing that man's tale—but to hope, and to be mistaken, would *kill* her. Don't you think if your brother is indeed my son, that I shall know it and feel it when we meet?"

I thought that they had already met often enough to disprove any theory of spontaneous recognition, and I ventured to say so, rather to his disappointment. But I thought also that my mother's better acquaintance with all the circumstances might enable

her to give some further detail that might amount to further proof.

In one sense it was so. The amulet that had lain so many years in her dressing case was recognised at once by Siva, who had accompanied us to the Home Farm. Enough had been told him to make him aware of our errand, and the gentle and faithful old man was trembling with agitation and suspense. When he saw the shabby little trinket he went into ecstasies over it. He knew the cabalistic words inside it, and deciphered them for us, and he wept over some rather aimless scratches upon it, which he declared were intended by the little lord for the otters in his ancestral coat-of-arms. There was a faint resemblance when it was pointed out, and at all events the recognition of the amulet was a proof as strong as even the Earl could desire.

He seemed to feel it so, pouring out thanks to my mother with an eager gratitude that was very winning, and begging her not to disclaim it, as she seemed inclined to do.

"If you saved him unconsciously, you adopted him consciously. You have been a mother to him—and it is to you and to your husband I owe it that my boy is a son I am proud to claim," he said, with deep feeling. "Lady Otterbourne will come and thank you when she knows all she owes you, Mrs Graham, and I hope that Hazelford will never forget——" His voice broke, and he stopped, but I really think that, for the minute, neither of us knew whom he meant. "Hazelford!" Of course our Basil was Lord Hazelford, and to his father it was his fit

and natural name, but to us it sounded cold and strange.

"There he is!" I cried, and I ran out to him. Had not the Earl told me to break it to him? And for the next five minutes at least, he need not know—for the next five minutes he could be all and only my brother Basil!

That was my first selfish thought, but by the time I came up to him I was only anxious to fulfil my commission. How tired and ill he was looking, I thought—how bitterly he was feeling all he had gone through last night! He should not bear that needless burden a moment longer than I could help. So I told him all—as quickly and as clearly as I could, but perhaps it was not wonderful if I failed to make him understand. From Trumpeter Ford to the Earl of Otterbourne was a turn in the wheel of fortune that might have tried any man's faith, and it was perhaps only natural that Basil looked at me incredulously, and with a secret anxiety at which I could afford to smile.

"I am not mad!" I protested, "I am not ill or light-headed, Basil, as I see you think. I am as well and as sane as you are, and if you don't believe me, come and see your father! Come and see Lord Otterbourne—your true father!—and forget the wretched old man we saw last night."

I spoke so earnestly that he followed me towards the house, though with a very puzzled and unbelieving face. But Lord Otterbourne had seen us coming, and came eagerly to meet us, and I think one look at him must have dispelled any lingering doubts.

"How is it I never knew you?" cried the Earl, grasping his son's hands, and gazing earnestly at him. "My boy, my boy! how is it I never saw your mother in your face?"

That was his greeting, and perhaps it did as well as any other. Two grown Englishmen could not fall on each others' necks in broad daylight, even though they were a father and son who had believed each other dead for twenty years. With a curious likeness in their mutual self-restraint, they went into the house together, and the old Indian ran forward and fell at their feet. Siva was neither English nor self-restrained, and his emotions had the artlessness which makes all Orientals seem childish in English eyes.

"My lord! my dear young lord!" he cried, clasping Basil's knees, and weeping unaffectedly. "Thank Heaven I have lived to see this day!"

It was only a poor untaught Hindu who said it, but I think he spoke the thought that was in all our hearts.





## CHAPTER XXIX.

### MRS FIELDING'S LETTER.

“What more felicitie can fall to creature  
Than to enjoy delight with libertie?”—*Spenser.*

**L**IFE cannot be carried on in the rarefied atmosphere of intense emotion, any more than men can breathe on the tops of mountains, and the recurrent claims of ordinary existence are the stepping stones that bring us down to safer if lower levels.

In the first exaltation of meeting, I doubt not that the Earl and Basil—in spite of their composed demeanour—lost sight of everything but the fact that they had met at last; but the sound of our early dinner-bell made the Earl rise hurriedly, and exclaim that it was luncheon time, and that we must be getting back to the Castle.

He would fain have taken us all with him. He could not part from “Hazelford,” and Miss Temple would be expecting me; while for my mother, she could not be left to a solitary meal, and Lady Otterbourne would be only too glad of the opportunity of thanking her. But my mother was wiser than the Earl, and would not hear of it. The excitement of

seeing her son would be trying enough for Lady Otterbourne, without further exertion, she said, with unanswerable truth ; and as she herself would be returning to Hazelford in the afternoon, she thought I had better go with her.

"You will all be glad to be alone," said my mother, "and as I must lose my son, I shall be glad to keep my daughter."

She kissed Basil with tears in her eyes, and as tenderly as if he had been indeed the son she called him, and I think Basil was scarcely less moved. It was a relief to both, I believe, when the Earl took him away. They went off arm-in-arm, followed by faithful Siva, with his outlandish garments, and his honest, beaming face, and my mother and I watched them till they were out of sight, and then had our cry out together.

"Though why we should cry, when it is all for dear Basil's good," said my mother, drying her eyes, and achieving a very puckered and watery smile, "I'm sure I don't know. It only shows how silly we are !"

By way, perhaps, of proving her own words, she cried again immediately, and I had to console her as best I could.

"It *is* for his good, as you say yourself," I reminded her, "and after all, he will not be more lost to us than if he had married May."

"Than *if* ?" said my mother, quite reviving with the surprise, "do you mean that you think he won't marry her *now* ?"

"Perhaps they won't let him !" I said, indulging the wish that was certainly father to the thought.

There would be an inequality in the marriage beyond any that Mrs Fielding had mourned over, but on the other side ; and I thought it would be only a just Nemesis if the Earl and Countess refused their consent. I said something of the kind, but my mother shook her head.

“ Basil has a will of his own, my dear, and I doubt if he will give her up, whatever they may say. It is not as if it were a new engagement. They can hardly interfere now the day is fixed—and the Fieldings are an old family, and take a very good position. But certainly Mrs Fielding will hold her head higher than ever, when her daughter is Lady Hazelford.”

I could not contemplate that possibility with the same equanimity as my mother. What would wealth or rank be to Basil, if he married May Fielding ? And then I thought of Dieudonné, and my heart sank within me. How would Basil bear the daily presence of the girl he loved ? How would Dieudonné bear to live under the same roof with Basil and Basil's wife ?

I was glad to be forced out of speculations like these by the necessity for packing up and returning home. When I had done I sat down in the pretty white-draped room, with its small lattice window and lean-to ceiling, its pleasant outlook on trees and fields, on red-tiled barns and the soft outlines of rick and stack, and felt sad to think that I was leaving this peaceful country life behind me, even as Basil was. I had come to love the Home Farm both for his sake and its own. The solitude that might sometimes be only a dual blessedness was sweet as no formal state could ever be ; the homely rooms, with their simple

furnishing, their fragrant whiteness, redolent as much of woodruff and honeysuckle, of lavender and dog-rose, as of Mrs Munns' active pail and brush, had a charm that gilded salons would perhaps lack.

On everything about me was the glamour of parting that ennobles the mean and gives the beautiful an added beauty ; and above all was the reflection that henceforth he would be Viscount Hazelford, and here he had been my brother Basil.

I was glad when the dog-cart came to the door, driven not now by Basil, but by Job Jenkins, the "odd-man," who took to the reins as naturally as to milking stool or spade or plough. He was a taciturn man, whose scanty words always seemed to be waiting in vain for the ideas that never came, and we were half-way home before he even opened his mouth. Then he said, with a smile that hovered carefully round one corner, and refused to commit itself further—

"That old gemmen at Burdon's is in a rare takin'—and sarve 'im right !"

"Do you mean the man who calls himself Trumpeter Ford ?" asked my mother.

"Ay, if that's his name. He were to hev hed fifty pound from a party at the Castle—and they've gone off without giving 'im a penny. And my lord's sent him word if he wants to keep out of prison, he'd better take hisself off too."

"What ! Has Colonel Hazelford gone ?" I exclaimed, and Job nodded slowly.

"That were the name of the party, miss—though I'm not good at names. Ees—he's gone, and his black nigger with him. They was both cleared out

afore the Earl and Muster Ford got back to the Castle, and Molly Burdon says she niver heerd a man take on as that old soldier did when he heerd of it. And sarve 'im right, I say! To cast it up at master as *he* were the feyther on 'im!"

"You've heard who Mr Basil's father really is, Job, haven't you?"

"Ees, miss," said Job, equably. "I've heerd, an' I've no objection, 'cept about the hay. Who's to get the hay in is what I thinks on. They're cutting in the four-acre to-day, and we was to begin in the home-croft to-morrow—and now I doubt 'twill be sheading its seed afore ever we gets a scythe into it!"

Job shook his head and relapsed into silence, and I had no consolation to offer. If the getting in of the hay depended on Basil, I thought Job must resign himself to a spoilt crop. However, I knew later that Uncle Chayter had proved himself equal to the occasion, riding over to the farm, and overlooking the men with as much energy, and almost as much knowledge, as Basil himself could have displayed.

My kind and energetic uncle met us at our own door in quite a fever of excitement. He had been at the Castle when the Earl and Basil arrived, and was brimming over with congratulations. Whatever faults Basil Ford had once had in my uncle's eyes, they were all condoned now. Viscount Hazelford could do no wrong, and Uncle Chayter was the warmest of his admirers. Even his marriage seemed a pill that could be swallowed without undue grimacing.

"Of course he might have looked far higher, but as the Earl says, a Hazelford cannot break his word," said Uncle Chayter. "Basil—that is, Lord Hazelford—is coming in to see May this afternoon, and he told me to tell you he would come round here before he goes back to the Castle."

It seemed to me, after that, that the day was just a waiting for the night—or at least for the evening hour that was to bring my brother with it. But at last it came—and earlier than I had ventured to hope.

I saw him afar off, riding one of the Earl's horses, and as he came near there was a look upon his face I did not know how to interpret. Had he seen May, and had their meeting left that wonderful look of sweetness and of peace?—or was it the lingering after-glow of his meeting with his mother?

He came in, and I knew at once that he had something to tell me. I knew it by the way he held my hands and looked down upon me, by the brightness of his eyes, and the tremulous sweetness of his smile.

"What is it?" I asked him. "Have you seen May?"

"No," he said, gravely. "I was going to see her, Esther—to lay at her feet the honours she would, I thought, have cared for so much more than I—but I called in at the Farm on my way, and I found *this*."

"This" was a pink and perfumed note, addressed in Mrs Fielding's pointed hand:—

"DEAR MR FORD,—I have a painful duty to



““WHAT IS IT? HAVE YOU SEEN MAY?””—Page 308.



perform, but I have no choice but to do it. The change in your position has come to my knowledge, and both Mr Fielding and myself desire that your engagement with our daughter should cease. An unequal marriage is never a happy one, and beside this, I have for some time feared that May's affections had undergone a change. She has confessed to me now that this is the case, and I am sure you will feel she is doing right in breaking off an engagement she could only have fulfilled from a mistaken sense of honour. It only remains for me to hope that you will both yet find happiness in your own stations, and to bid you good-bye in my daughter's name. With every good wish for your happiness and welfare, believe me, yours faithfully,

"AMELIA FIELDING."

I laid down the note in utter amazement. "How can she have heard of it?" I exclaimed. "And who could have thought she would have taken it like this?"

"Potts is the secret of it, I suppose!" said Basil. "May has learnt—as I have—that there is a love quite different from the boy-and-girl feeling we had for each other, and that nothing else can make up for the want of it. But it is really very noble of Mrs Fielding—and very disinterested of May. I shall write and tell her how entirely I wish her happiness. There's some paper in the old place, I suppose? How odd it feels to be at home again, and to think that it is my home no more! I could get quite sentimental, but for the happiness it seems to be to *them*."

I knew that he meant the Earl and Countess, and I asked him if he had seen Lady Otterbourne.

"Yes," he said, with a look that was wonderfully sweet. "I can't tell you about it, Esther. Somehow I never thought it would be like that! I never knew—I could not remember—what it really was to have a mother."

He broke off, and sat down to write his letter, and I did not interrupt him. I did not wonder that he could not speak, even to me, of the interview that must have been full of a pleasure keen as pain, and hardly to be distinguished from it.

Presently he looked up, and asked in an odd, shy voice—

"How shall I sign myself? You see she calls me 'Mr Ford.'"

"That is from habit—or perhaps she was not quite sure of your real name," I suggested. "Sign the name that is yours now—you can't use any other."

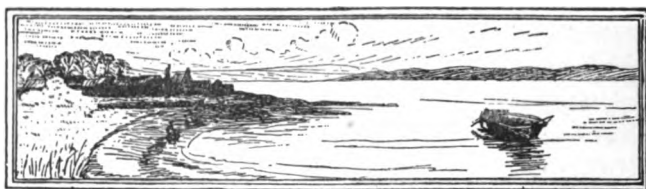
So he wrote his "Hazelford" for the first time, and sent off his letter. And if I did not congratulate him on his release, it was because no words could have expressed the relief and joy it was to me, and I knew how well he knew it.

My mother was full of wonder and of admiration for the Fieldings, but when Charlie came in that night and read the letter, he burst into one of his artless roars.

"And do you mean to say that neither you nor Basil saw through it?" he exclaimed. "Oh, Esther, Esther! what a pair of Babes in the Wood you are!

And he wrote and took her at her word? Mrs Fielding will *die* of it, if she isn't dead already! Don't you see that she's got hold of the *wrong* story? It's all over Hazelford that Trumpeter Ford has turned up, and when she finds out her mistake—I wouldn't be the Vicar!"





## CHAPTER XXX.

### CONCLUSION.

“Not as a child shall we again behold her,  
For when, with rapture wild,  
In our embraces we again enfold her,  
She will not be a child.”—*Longfellow.*

THE discovery that Basil Ford was actually the son and heir of the Earl of Otterbourne threw the little town of Hazelford into the wildest excitement. Uncle Chayter was buttonholed at least half-a-dozen times every time he went down the High Street, and my mother and I received so many invitations to afternoon tea that, if muffins are as indigestible as Dr Cheriton says they are, we ought to be victims to dyspepsia for the rest of our lives. The only people who did not share in the general rejoicing were the Fieldings, who kept curiously quiet. The Vicar—good, honest man—looked unaffectedly low-spirited, and Mrs Fielding and May went off to Ilfracombe before the week was out, with the admirable Potts in their train.

When they came back, May's engagement to the Honourable Fitz-Jocelyn Marmaduke Potts was formally announced, and if Mrs Fielding's gratification in

the possession of "an Honourable" for a son-in-law was damped by the reflection that, but for own precipitancy her daughter might now have been a Viscountess, she managed to hide her feelings, put on her stateliest air, and enlarged in quite an affecting manner on disinterested affection and the claims of Love. To do May justice, I believe that her love was sincere enough. The charms of the Admirable one had fairly turned her pretty little head, and she went about in a flutter of delight, congratulating herself that her trousseau was all ready, and only troubled by a quite unnecessary fear lest Basil should be breaking his heart. But even this illusory regret vanished before Lord Hazelford's hearty congratulations, and the magnificent bracelet with which he presented the bride who had so nearly been his own, and May sweetly declared that her felicity was complete.

She was married after only a month's engagement, but before her wedding an event had happened beside which pretty May's affairs seemed trivial indeed—an event that must be told as plainly and briefly as I can, simply because any words I could use would fail to describe it adequately.

Lady Otterbourne came to see my mother as the Earl had promised, but she came not only to express her gratitude for all my dear mother had done for the child for whose rescue she had paid so terrible a price, but as the bearer of tidings that surely that child's mother was fittest in all the world to bring. She came in, leaning on her son's arm, and looking so much brighter and younger, I could hardly believe it was the pale and melancholy invalid, whose

existence had seemed to be only a sad memory of happier days. Except that her eyes could not leave Basil's face, there was nothing but the silver hair to recall the time that was so little overpast, but that seemed so far away. It was touching to see that soft, following gaze, and to discern, as I did, how necessary mother and son had already become to each other. My own dear mother might be forgiven the wistful sigh that fluttered to her lips. She rejoiced with purest rejoicing in Basil's change of fortune, but perhaps to see him sitting by Lady Otterbourne's side made her feel doubly bereaved. If he had never taken Nelly's place, he had helped to atone for that irreparable loss—and now he had left her too!

But if my mother was envying Lady Otterbourne to-day, it was the last day on which she would need to envy her, or any other happy mother. For her, too, happiness was coming—was already at the door!

Lady Otterbourne had only been with us a few minutes, when she gave her son a pretty peremptory nod, and he got up and beckoned me out of the room.

"I want to leave them together, Esther, your mother and mine. My mother has found out something so strange—so extraordinary—and yet the only wonder is that no one thought of it before! It is about Miss Temple. But cannot you guess? About Ellinor Dieudonnée—the child who was found where Nelly was lost—the child whose name is Ellinor!"

"But, Basil," I gasped, "Nelly was *fair*! It was

your light hair that made my mother take you for her, you know."

"I know. But my mother has a lock of Miss Temple's far fairer than mine!—and a portrait, taken when she was quite a little girl, with long fair curls looking so droll by the great dark eyes. She has brought them here for the mother to see, and the little gown she had on, with *Ellinor* in one corner."

"Only *Ellinor*?"

"The rest had been torn or cut away. Don't you know that she was wounded, and the woman who was with her killed? Siva says it was an ayah, and that she had most likely been killed in trying to save her."

"Our dear Wuzeerun! she was always so fond of Nelly!" I exclaimed, and then Basil said—"Ah! you see, you believe it too!"

"I *hope* it, certainly. Does *she*—does *Nelly* know?"

"Yes, she is waiting in the carriage. She dared not come in till your mother knew, but I can fetch her here."

She came back with him, trembling and blushing with something more than filial anxiety, I thought, and I clasped her in my arms. Whether she was my sister or not, she was dearer to me than anything on earth—this girl whom Basil loved!

"Do you think it can be true? Oh, Esther, do you think it can be true?" cried the girl who might be Nelly, but could hardly be dearer if she were. And then the drawing-room door opened, and the Countess came out, and we saw my mother standing with outstretched arms, and a face transfigured with

a rapture of yearning and wonder and love. The Countess stood aside, and it was Basil, the child for whom she had unwittingly sacrificed her own, who put the long-lost daughter into the poor empty arms, and coming back to us, shut the door and looked at us with glistening eyes.

"It was all *his* doing," the Countess said. "He was talking of your mother and her goodness to him, though he had been the innocent occasion of her terrible loss, and then the Earl told him how Donnie had been found, and the "*Ellinor*" on the little gown struck him at once. He would not rest till I brought it to show Mrs Graham, and the likeness of Donnie just after she was found. She knew them at once—and oh! shall I ever forget her face?"

I tried to say something, but I was too shaken and agitated, and I think Lady Otterbourne understood.

She carried Basil off, without waiting to see my mother or Nelly again, as he would fain have done. "My dear boy, you know nothing about it," she said imperiously, laying her delicate hand on the tall shoulder that towered so far above her. "Did I want any other woman's bairn when I got you?"

And so they went away, and left us to our joy; but before she went, Lady Otterbourne stooped and kissed me and whispered in my ear—"I leave her with your mother, my dear, but tell her to make the most of her! Unless I am much mistaken, it will not be for long."

It was not. Only long enough, Nelly said, to taste the sweetness of a mother's and a sister's love, to find

in Charlie the brother she had always longed for, and then to follow her woman's destiny, and leave us all for the imperious claims of a love stronger and deeper still.

It is all a year ago now, a year since Nelly left us once more, and went back to Hazelford Castle as Viscount Hazelford's bride. The Home Farm is the Home Farm no more ; or rather, the house no more belongs to it. The young lord, as the villagers call him, cannot lead an idle life, and is still, the Earl declares, more than half a farmer at heart. He manages it himself, with Burdon promoted to be bailiff under him, and the house is beautified for a home for my mother and Charlie and me. We have our own servants, but Mrs Munns still manages the dairy, and looks after the Dutch separator and the automatic churn. Deva, truculent still, but undeniably handsome, takes a prize at every show he goes to, and is as well known in "Royal" showyards as Lord Hazelford himself.

Nothing has been heard of Colonel Hazelford or of Mirza Khan. They disappeared as completely as if the earth had swallowed them up, and I think Lord Otterbourne is very thankful to be relieved from the duty of prosecuting them.

"They will not go unpunished," he says, truly enough. "No sin and no sinner ever did that yet ; but at least we may hope they will find time for repentance."

Charlie is at Sandhurst, and Lord Otterbourne has promised him all sorts of introductions when he gets his commission. We are quite happy, my mother and

I, about the boy who is left to us—as happy as we are about the one who seems to have gone so far from us, though only the width of the park divides his home from ours.

The Home Farm would not be my home now, if Dr Cheriton could have had his way. But though he has asked me to leave it for his more times than I care to say, I have not found it possible to consent.

“I do not ask you to love me yet,” this good man said, the last time he spoke of it. “I would love you so much, Esther, that I know it would come in time, if only you would let me try.”

“I cannot—I cannot indeed,” was all I could find to say, and then I think he lost his senses for a few minutes.

“Do you think I do not know why?” he cried. “Oh Esther, why will you waste your life on a dream? Oh, my dear, could not my love atone?”

I did not know what he meant, nor did I ask him. I did not want his love, nor do I want any man's, so long as my life is blessed with the fraternal affection of him whom men call Lord Hazelford, whom mother and wife address by the Christian name that has grown dear to them while still it sounds strange to me, but who to me has always been, and will always be, only my Brother Basil.





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